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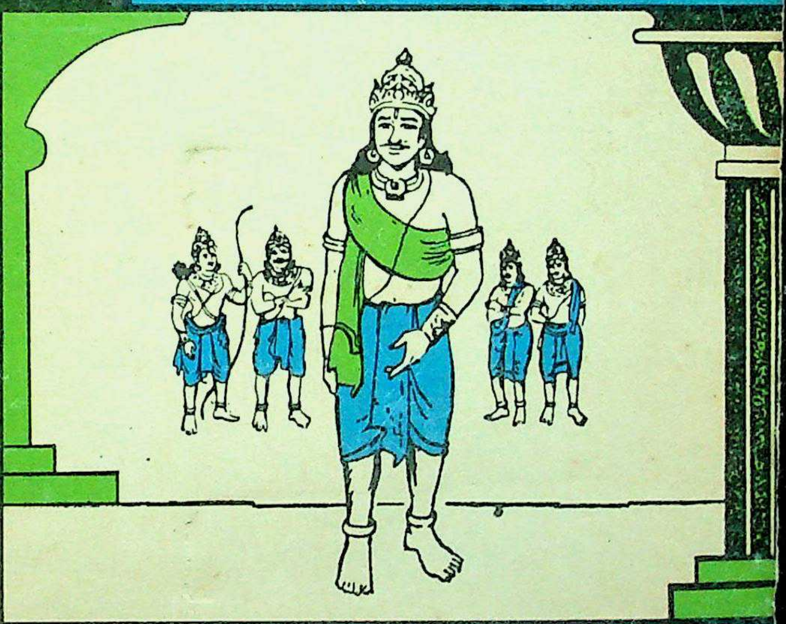
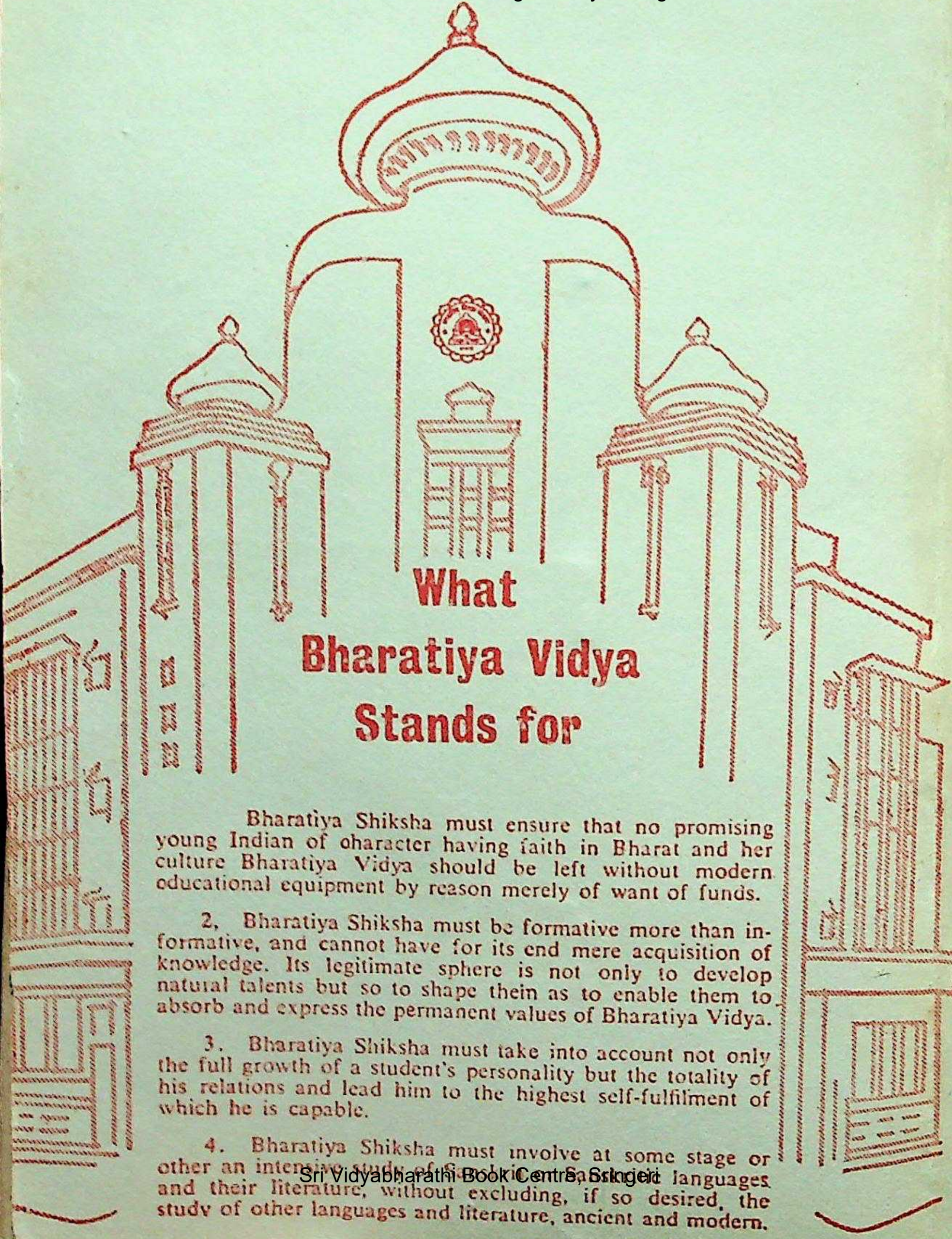
KRISHNAVATARA VII

THE BOOK OF YUDHISHTHIRA



K. M. MUNSHI

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY-400 007



What Bharatiya Vidya Stands for

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

2. Bharatiya Shiksha must be formative more than informative, and cannot have for its end mere acquisition of knowledge. Its legitimate sphere is not only to develop natural talents but so to shape them as to enable them to absorb and express the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya.

3. Bharatiya Shiksha must take into account not only the full growth of a student's personality but the totality of his relations and lead him to the highest self-fulfilment of which he is capable.

4. Bharatiya Shiksha must involve at some stage or other an intensive study of Sanskrit or Sanskritic languages and their literature, without excluding, if so desired, the study of other languages and literature, ancient and modern.

5. The re-integration of Bharatiya Vidya, which is the primary object of Bharatiya Shiksha, can only be attained through a study of forces, movements, motives, ideas, forms and art of creative life-energy through which it has expressed itself in different ages as a single continuous process.

6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

7. The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

(a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration; and

(b) the adoption by the student of the *Sishya* attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher,

(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which is flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form of attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world.

आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः ।
Let noble thoughts come to us from every side
—Rigveda, I.89.-i

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

General Editors
R. R. DIWAKAR
S. RAMAKRISHNAN

241

KRISHNAVATARA

Volume VII

THE BOOK OF YUDHISHTHIRA

With 13 Chapters of Volume VIII
THE BOOK OF KURUKSHETRA

By
K. M. MUNSHI

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Book Centre,
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By
K. M. MUNSHI

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KULAPATI'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-Indian organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any make-shift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita*, by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

INTRODUCTION

WHO has not heard of Sri Krishna who delivered the message of the *Bhagavad Gita* and whom the *Bhagavata* calls 'God Himself'?

From the earliest days that my memories can go back to, Sri Krishna has been, in a sense, dominating my imagination. In my childhood, I heard his adventures with breathless amazement. Since then I have read of him, sung of him, admired him and worshipped him in a hundred temples and every year on his birthday at home. And day after day, for years and years, his message has been the strength of my life.

Unfortunately, his fascinating personality, which could be glimpsed in what may be called the original *Mahabharata*, has been overlaid with legends, myths, miracles and adorations for about three thousand years.

Wise and valorous, he was loving and loved, far-seeing and yet living for the moment, gifted with sage-like detachment and yet intensely human; the diplomat, the sage and the man of action with a personality as luminous as that of a divinity.

The urge, therefore, came upon me, time and again, to embark upon a reconstruction of his life and adventures by weaving a romance around him.

It was an almost impossible venture, but like hundreds of authors, good, bad and indifferent, from all parts of India for centuries, I could not help offering him whatever little of imagination and creative power I possessed, feeble though they were.

I have called the whole work *Krishnavatara, The Descent of the Lord*. The First Part, which ends with the death of Kamsa, has been named *The Magic Flute,* for it deals with his boyhood associated with the flute, which hypnotised men, animals and birds alike, sung with such loving tenderness by innumerable poets.

The Second Part, which ends with Rukmini Haran, is entitled *The Wrath of an Emperor,* as the central theme is the successful defiance by Sri Krishna of Jarasandha, the Emperor of Magadha.

The Third Part is entitled *The Five Brothers* and ends with Draupadi's Swayamvara. The Fourth Part is entitled *The Book of Bhima,* the Fifth Part *The Book of Satyabhaama,* the Sixth Part *The Book of Veda Vyaasa, the Master,* and the Seventh Part *The Book of Yudhishthira.*

I hope to carry forward the series till the episode when, on the battle-field of Kurukshetra, Krishna reveals himself as the Eternal Guardian of the Cosmic Law—*Saashvata Dharma Gopta*—to Arjuna, if it is His will that I should do so.

I have followed the technique since 1922 to reconstruct the episodes connected with Chyavana and Sukanya in *Purandara Parajaya* (a play); Agastya and Lopamudra, Vasishta and Vishwamitra, Parashurama and Sahasrarjuna in *Vishvaratha* (a romance); *Deve Didheli* (a play); *Vishwamitra Rishi* (a play); *Lomaharshini* (a romance) and *Bhagavan Parashurama* (a romance), and now Sri Krishna and the heroes and heroines of the *Mahabharata* in these volumes of *Krishnavatara.*

Time and again, I have made it clear that none of these works is an English rendering of any old Purana.

INTRODUCTION

In reconstructing Sri Krishna's life and adventures, I had, like many of my predecessors, to reconstruct the episodes inherited from the past, so as to bring out his character, attitude and outlook with the personality-sustained technique of modern romance. I also had to give flesh and blood to various obscure characters referred to in the *Mahabharata*.

In the course of this adventure, I had often to depart from legend and myth, for such a reconstruction by a modern author must necessarily involve the exercise of whatever little imagination he has. I trust He will forgive me for the liberty I am taking, but I must write of Him as I see Him in my imagination.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
Bombay-7.
January 26, 1971

K. M. MUNSHI

CONTENTS

KRISHNAVATARA

Volume VII

THE BOOK OF YUDHISHTHIRA

CHAPTER — Page

Introduction iii
Prologue ix
Characters in this Story xiii
1. Yudhishthira's Dilemma 1
2. The Father's Message 8
3. Rajasuya—to be performed or not to be Performed 17
4. Meghasandhi's Message 24
5. The Three Visitors 32
6. The Wrath of the Gods 41
7. Bhima Plans a Digvijaya 49
8. A Strange Arrival 56
9. Agrapuja to Shree Krishna 64
10. The Chakra 69
11. The Prediction 74
12. Uncle Vidura Brings a Message 81
13. A Challenge to the Master's Prediction 87
14. Draupadi Protests 95
15. Duryodhana makes a request 98
16. Yudhishthira seeks a favour 103
17. The Throne Hall 107

KRISHNAVATARA—VII

CHAPTER Page

18. Let the Game Begin 110
19. Shakuni at his best 114
20. We Have Won 118
21. Draupadi is Dragged into the Throne Hall .. 123
22. Krishna ! Krishna ! Where are You ? 129
23. The Supreme Mandate 135
24. To The Forest 138

Volume VIII

THE BOOK OF KURUKSHETRA

CHAPTER Page

1. Agrapuja 149
2. The Challenge 154
3. The New Shape of Dwaraka 159
4. Mayavati 164
5. Through The Desert 169
6. Face to Face 174
7. The Mugg Fort 179
8. The Prison of Rose Buds 183
9. The Mandate 188
10. On The Battle-field 195
11. Shalva Laughs 200
12. Prabhavati Makes up her Mind 205
13. The Mother arrives 211

PROLOGUE

THE Emperor Shantanu of the powerful Bharatas, ruling from Hastinapura, had three sons—Devarata Gangeya (otherwise called Bhishma), who took a vow to remain a celibate and not to occupy his father's throne in Hastinapura; Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya, both of whom died young.

Vichitraveerya had two queens—Ambika and Ambalika. Ambika gave birth to a son named Dhritarashtra, and Ambalika gave birth to Pandu, who was in weak health.

According to the ancient canons, Dhritarashtra could not succeed to the throne because he was born blind. Pandu occupied the throne of Hastinapura for a short time. During his lifetime, his wives Kunti and Madri gave birth to five sons named Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna, and Nakula and Sahadeva, who were twins.

When Pandu died, Madri joined him on the funeral pyre, entrusting her two sons to Kunti, who thus became the mother of the five sons, who came to be known as "Five Pandava Brothers".

Dhritarashtra had several sons, who came to be called "the Kauravas"; the eldest of them was named Duryodhana and the next one Dushasana.

Satyavati, the dowager Empress of Shantanu, and Bhishma accepted the Five Brothers as the sons of Pandu; and Yudhishthira, being the eldest of them, was recognised as Crown Prince.

After Pandu's death, the venerable Mother, Satyavati, with the two Kashi princesses, Ambika and Ambalika, on the advice of the Master, went to live at the Gautama *ashram* at Godhuli.[1]

Bhishma invited Dronacharya and his brother-in-law, Kripacharya, two experts in the art of war, to settle in Hastinapura to train the Five Brothers and the Kauravas, the sons of Dhritarashtra, in the heroic tradition of the Bharatas.

The Five Brothers were distinguished by their righteous outlook; they also became experts in the use of arms.

Yudhishthira was wise and sober. Bhima had a zest for life and was ready to fight any one. Arjuna came to be recognised as the supreme archer in Aryavarta. Nakula specialised in rearing and breeding horses, then the most powerful engines of war. Sahadeva acquired the gift of foresight.

Duryodhana's principal adviser was his maternal uncle, Shakuni. He also secured the support of Karna, believed to be low-born, a brilliant warrior and a supreme archer, known for his generosity and loyalty to his friends, the Kauravas.

Inspired by inveterate jealousy, Duryodhana had a palace of lac built at Varanavata, in which the Five Brothers and their mother, Kunti, were invited to stay during a festival. While they were there, the palace was set fire to by an agent of Duryodhana's. Vidura, the Minister, arranged for them to escape from the burning palace.[2]

Further, to avoid Duryodhana's murderous intentions, the Five Brothers and their mother, Kunti, sought refuge in the forest, where they met a community of Rakshasas. Bhima killed Hidimba, the Rakshasa chief, and married his sister Hidimbaa. He had a son by her named Ghatotkacha.[3]

Kunti, the adopted daughter of King Kuntibhoj, was the sister of Vasudeva, the father of Krishna.

Krishna was distinguished for his astuteness, learning and valour. He was a master in the art of war. He soon acquired the reputation of being the defender of *dharma*, and took the Five Brothers under his protection.

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[1] *Krishnavatara*, Vol. VI, "The Book of Veda Vyaasa, the Master," Chapter 36.

[2] *Krishnavatara*, Vol. III, "The Five Brothers," Chapters 7 and 12.

[3] *Krishnavatara*, Vol. III, "The Five Brothers," Chapter 21.

In a *swayamvara*, Draupadi, daughter of King Drupad of Panchala, was won by Arjuna. At the instance of their mother, Kunti, and as advised by the Master, Veda Vyaasa, and Krishna, Draupadi was married to all the Five Brothers.[4]

With the Five Brothers allied to Drupad, the powerful King of Panchala, Dhritarashtra had no other alternative but to invite the Five Brothers to Hastinapura and install Yudhishthira as the Emperor of Hastinapura. However, in order to obviate a conflict between his sons and the Five Brothers, he advised the Five Brothers to go to the banks of the Yamuna and settle at Indraprastha, which had been a very ancient capital of the Kurus.[5]

Guided by the Master and with the active support of Krishna and King Drupad, the Five Brothers soon developed Indraprastha as a centre of power and *dharma.* Many people from Hastinapura and elsewhere also followed the Five Brothers to Indraprastha. After the city was founded, Yudhishthira was crowned King.

After the coronation, the Master returned to Dharmakshetra and Krishna to Dwaraka.

Krishna returned to Indraprastha when the Yadavas came to attend the wedding of Arjuna with Subhadra, the sister of Krishna. After the wedding, most of the Yadavas left Indraprastha, but Krishna, at the pressing request of the Five Brothers, continued to stay in Indraprastha with his followers. During this period, Krishna helped Arjuna to burn the forest of Khandava to secure more room for the growing population of Indraprastha.

The Five Brothers loved Krishna not only as a cousin, but as their saviour and guide, almost adoring him as a deity.

After some time, Krishna requested the Five Brothers to let him return to Dwaraka.

All the Five Brothers, with their family and the residents of Indraprastha, turned out to bid good-bye to him.

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[4] *Krishnavatara*, Vol. III, "The Five Brothers," Chapter 49.
[5] *Krishnavatara*, Vol. IV, "The Book of Bhima," Chapter 31.

CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY

SRI KRISHNA

Balarama—His elder brother.

Vasudeva—His father, Chief of the Shoora tribe of the Yadavas and brother of Kunti, the mother of the Five Brothers.

Devaki—His mother.

Rukmini, Shaibya, Satyabhama and Jambavanti—His wives.

Subhadra —His sister, married to Arjuna.

Uddhava, Yuyudhana Satyaki—His relations and friends.

KRISHNA DVAIPAAYANA VYASA

—Son of Sage Paraashara by Satyavati and great-grand-son of the Vedic Rishi Vasishtha; the redactor of *Vedas* and the most revered Muni in Aryavarta, styled the "Master" or the "Best of Munis"

Vatika—His wife—daughter of Rishi Jabaali.

Sukadeva—His son.

Vidura—Principal Minister of Hastinapura and son of a maid-servant, begotten by Krishna Dvaipaayana Vyasa.

BHISHMA

(Also Gangeya)

King Shantanu—His father, Emperor of Hastinapura, of the Kuru tribe.

Satyavati—His step-mother, the spouse of the Emperor Shantanu.

Chitrangada, Vichitraveerya—His step-brothers, Satyavati's sons.

Ambika, Ambalika—Vichitraveerya's wives; daughters of the King of Kashi.

PANDAVAS:

The Five Brothers.

Pandu—Son of Ambalika and King of Hastinapura.

Kunti—His wife, sister of Vasudeva, the father of Sri Krishna.

Madri—His wife, sister of Salya, the King of Madra.

Yudhishthira (also Dharmaputra), Bhima, Arjuna—His sons by Kunti.

Nakula, Sahadeva—His twin sons by Madri.

KURUS:

Dhritarashtra—Blind son of Ambika and father of Duryodhana and others called the Kauravas.

Gandhari—His wife, daughter of King Sabal of Gandhara.

Shakuni—His brother-in-law (brother of Gandhari).

Duryodhana, Dushasana—His sons.

OTHERS:

Jarasandha—Emperor of Magadha.

Sahadeva—His son.

Meghasandhi—His grandson.

Dronacharya—A pupil of Parashurama and the teacher of the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the art of war.

Aswatthama—Dronacharya's son.

Kripacharya—Dronacharya's brother-in-law and teacher of military science.

CHAPTER 1

YUDHISHTHIRA'S DILEMMA

IT was a splendid farewell that was given to Krishna. The whole of Indraprastha had gathered in the spacious grounds of the palace or had lined the streets of the city.

Acharya Dhaumya, the royal preceptor, with all the *Srotriyas,* stood in one of the lines of people, with rice-grains in his hands, ready to shower them on the departing guest by way of blessing.

Yudhishthira led Krishna to where the latter's chariot was waiting. Daruka, the charioteer, with the reins in his hand, was ready to let the impatient horses go as soon as his master took his seat in the chariot. All Krishna's arms had been kept in their proper positions in the chariot by Satyaki, his friend, who was however staying behind to take lessons in archery from Arjuna, the master-archer of Aryavarta.

As soon as Krishna stepped out from the palace door, the crowd burst into vociferous shouts of "Jaya Sri Krishna". Krishna, with his winning smile, responded with folded hands.

He was dressed in an immaculate yellow-coloured, silk pitamber; his scarf thrown over his shoulders was gold-embroidered; his rich, gem-studded necklace of gold glistened in the sunshine; his diadem was topped by a peacock feather.

He was younger than Yudhishthira and Bhima, and older than Arjuna by a year, but age had refused to leave its mark on his ever-youthful face.

Acharya Dhaumya approached and told him that the auspicious time for him to leave had arrived. Krishna fell at the feet of Kunti, his father's sister; exchanged affectionate glances with Draupadi; lifted the little chin of Subhadra, his younger sister, now the wife of Arjuna, and tapped her mischievously; and pressed the cheeks of the infant sons of the Five Brothers.

'Can I have my chariot back which you stole from me to kidnap Arjuna?' asked Krishna.

Subhadra blushed and looked down, and with lowered eye-lids, lashed an upward glance at her brother, whom she had loved—adored—since her infancy.

Bhima and Arjuna were walking on either side of Krishna; the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, and Satyaki brought up the rear.

When they reached the chariot, Yudhishthira held Krishna's hand: 'Wait. There is a surprise for you', he said.

'What is it?' asked Krishna.

'You will soon know', replied Yudhishthira, with a smile.

Yudhishthira then asked Daruka, the charioteer, to leave his place for a little and he took the driver's seat. 'I am going to drive your chariot', he said.

'What is this? asked Krishna, surprised.

'Don't ask any questions. You will just see for yourself', replied Yudhishthira.

Yudhishthira made a sign to Bhima, who stepped in front of Krishna, climbed into the chariot and took the *chamar* in his hand; Arjuna opened the umbrella and held it over Krishna.

'Now get into the chariot', requested Yudhishthira.

'But, what is this?' asked Krishna. 'I am overwhelmed by your affection, but I don't deserve these marks of respect. I am not a king, much less a *Chakravarti*'.

'Now, get in, Krishna, otherwise I will have to lift you into the chariot', said Bhima.

Krishna looked at the Five Brothers with eyes filled with love. He climbed into the chariot and took his seat between Bhima and Arjuna.

Yudhishthira then took the reins in his hand. The horses sprang into action.

"Jaya Sri Krishna", roared the crowd. Krishna responded to the affectionate greeting with folded hands.

The chariot sped fast. When they reached the outskirts of the city, Yudhishthira reined in the horses and gave the reins to Daruka.

He then climbed out of the chariot; so did the other brothers. Krishna also climbed out of the chariot and touched the feet of Yudhishthira, who raised him and embraced him.

'May you ever be victorious', the Eldest gave his blessing.

Krishna then touched the feet of Bhima. Bhima embraced him, and in doing so, lifted him off the ground; smiling broadly, he drew in the scent of Krishna's hair. The other brothers, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, touched the feet of Krishna, who gave them an affectionate hug. The last to touch Krishna's feet was Satyaki, his friend.

'Why am I treated like a *Chakravarti?*' asked Krishna. 'These formalities are reserved for a conqueror. And I am neither a conqueror, nor a *Chakravarti*'.

'Who says you are not?' replied Bhima with mock indignation. 'I will break the head of anyone who says you are not'.

Yudhishthira, smiling, said: 'You are *our Chakravarti;* that is enough for us.'

Krishna climbed into the chariot. Daruka took the reins in his hand. The four horses neighed merrily and took to the road.

The Five Brothers continued to look at the disappearing chariot till it was out of sight.

* * *

Yudhishthira, the eldest of the Five Brothers, felt a void in his heart, now that Krishna Vaasudeva had just left for Dwaraka.

They owed everything to him—Yudhishthira thought—their life; their status; their marriage with Drupad's daughter: their securing part of their heritage to be enjoyed by them without interference from their hate-filled cousins; the burning of Khandava, giving them large areas near Indraprastha for settling people; why, even their very existence.

Thanks to Krishna's leadership, the help of the Yadavas and the Panchalas had been mobilized speedily.

It was he who had rescued Asur Maya from the burning Khandava and secured a promise to build for them a unique *Sabha* which nobody had ever seen before.

A fratricidal conflict, may be a war, would surely have followed if Krishna had not intervened; his brothers were ready to fight for their patrimony, as was Duryodhana to deny it.

But for him, Bhima and Arjuna would never have accepted the decision that the best course to avoid bloodshed was for them to leave Hastinapura and re-build Indraprastha.

Now things were happily settled. Indraprastha was becoming a centre of *dharma*, attracting men and women from Hastinapura as well as other parts of the country.

With Krishna's departure, so thought Yudhishthira, personal relations would fall into a proper perspective. That was not possible so long as he lived with them; in his presence everything took its colour from his vivid personality and the atmosphere was charged with high aspirations. That atmosphere would disappear, now that he had left them.

Yudhishthira thought of the strange sequence of events which had placed them—the Five Brothers—in a series of difficult situations, without any initiative on their part. The only unique thing about them was the bond which kept them together.

This was due to the wisdom of their mother Kunti. When they were brought to Hastinapura in their childhood, she had taken a promise from them that they would share everything equally; that he, as the eldest brother, should be respected as a father and, for his part, should treat the others with fatherly solicitude; and that they should defend Yudhishthira's life at any cost whenever danger threatened him.

Up to now they had scrupulously observed this vow; so long as his life lasted, he would not, whatever the cost, break it. Where would they have been but for the high-spirited courage of Bhima or the noble heroism of Arjuna or the silent service which the Twins rendered to him; above all, but for the faith of their mother, Kunti, that they would keep the bond inviolate?

Draupadi, married to all the Five Brothers, had a strange way of keeping them united. She lived for all the Five Brothers, and they lived in her. She was proud of her father, proud of her husbands; by her faith in them, she kept them unfalteringly on their heroic path of high endeavour, the way of *kshaatra-dharma*. If she ever discovered that he, Yudhishthira, had fallen from the high pedestal of a dedicated *kshatriya*, her heart would break. She lived in high tension all the time; she might even court the fire.

Arjuna and the Twins, if they ever learned of his feelings, would never respect him again.

He knew that his brothers lusted for battle. Like true kshatriyas, they were quick to take offence, ever ready to right a wrong, unforgiving in their attitude towards Duryodhana and his brothers. He felt like a thief, concealing his sentiments, but what oppressed him most was what would happen if his brothers knew of his weakness.

Bhima, brave, good-natured and headstrong, had a keen protective attitude towards all his brothers. On more than one occasion, he had risked his life to help them to tide over difficulties. On the slightest indication that he, Yudhishthira, wanted to betray *kshaatra-dharma,* Bhima would have fallen into an explosive fury; he would have stormed; he would have cursed; he would have withdrawn his affection from Yudhishthira. Possibly, in a sudden outburst of rage, he might have departed.

Above all, Bhima hated Duryodhana who reciprocated his hate with malice and venom. Bhima was bold and generous, inclined to forget a wrong. However, he could never forget Duryodhana trying to drown him in his boyhood; and having sent him and his brothers to Varanavata to be burnt alive in the palace of lac. To escape his murderous intentions, they had had to live in Rakshasavarta.

After they were married to Draupadi, Duryodhana, by Karna's advice, was ready to lead an army against them. He desisted from this course only out of fear of Grandfather Bhishma.

Most of the Kuru leaders were anxious to avoid a fratricidal conflict, which would certainly develop into a war. Yudhishthira was unhappy at that prospect, and was glad that Krishna had induced his brothers, particularly Bhima, to support the partition of the realm, Duryodhana getting Hastinapura and the Five Brothers getting the wilderness named Indraprastha.

Yudhishthira was happy that now Duryodhana's claim would also be satisfied, as he would be the uncontested master of Hastinapura. The Brothers cheerfully accepted Indraprastha, according to Krishna's advice.

Krishna had always had the capacity to achieve more valuable results by his statesmanship than by military conflicts. Yudhishthira thought that it was a very satisfactory solution.

Krishna's invaluable aid had helped them to put Indraprastha into shape. The Master, Muni Dvaipaayana, was satisfied. Mother Kunti was happy.

However, Yudhishthira was shrewd enough to see that Duryodhana's jealousy and malice were incurable.

Yudhishthira also knew that his brothers felt that they were wrongfully kept from their father's heritage.

Though appreciative of the motives and the grievances on each side, he did not want war.

CHAPTER 2

THE FATHER'S MESSAGE

YUDHISHTHIRA was faced with a terrible choice. He himself was a kshatriya, trained in the art of war; he was proud of the heroic achievements of his ancestors, the Bharatas.

To a kshatriya, war was a gigantic *yajna*—a sacrificial ritual, in which his blood had to be poured forth as a libation to win glory and secure a place in the Heavens.

The burden of keeping alive the flame of a *kshaatra-dharma* rested on him. If he departed from this epic tradition, his brothers, his wife and his mother, even Krishna, would disown him. No, he must maintain it at all costs.

Often, the Five Brothers and the women-folk in the family met together to talk about what concerned their welfare and the plans that they were making to make Indraprastha a great power. Then the conversation would range round the ways and means of winning glory and securing the triumph of *dharma*.

Bhima always took a lead in such discussions. Whatever happened, he said, Indraprastha must be stronger than Hastinapura; Duryodhana must not be a *Chakravarti;* he was evil, jealous, malicious and cunning, and bent on destroying them, the Five Brothers.

Arjuna incessantly practised *dhanur-vidya*—the science and art of archery—to discover ways to vanquish an adversary like Karna, Duryodhana's friend, who was considered to be the supreme master in archery.

Even Nakula, whose main interest in life was rearing horses, was happy. The chariot races that he was holding were only rehearsals for the war to keep the horses in fit condition. War was a real thing and he wanted it. He often boasted that his finest horse was more powerful than *Dadhikravas,* the divine horse.

Sahadeva, as usual, did not speak; he never spoke unless a question was put to him. He sat quietly following the conversation, withholding all comment.

During such discussions, Yudhishthira, the Eldest, had to exercise great control over himself, so as not to make any comment which might be understood as betraying *kshaatra-dharma* (the pledge of righteous valour).

Again and again, they discussed the possibility of bringing the neighbouring chiefs under their hegemony to increase their power and influence in Aryavarta.

About three months after Krishna had departed for Dwaraka, while the Brothers were discussing the ways and means of securing glory, Bhima described the necessity of performing one of the principal sacrificial sessions—*Vajpeya, Rajasuya* or *Aswamedha.*

Even Mother Kunti, who generally disapproved of bloody conflicts, suddenly took an interest in Bhima's words. Recalling the past, she described how her lord, Pandu, had wanted to perform the *Rajasuya yajna.* Though he had conquered far and wide, and secured the allegiance of many kings, she said, his wish had remained unfulfilled.

This chance recollection made a deep impression upon all those present. Yudhishthira felt like making a comment, but restrained himself.

'We shall fulfil it, Mother', said Bhima. His eyes glowed with pride. There was a deep flush even on the cheek of his ebullient wife, Jalandharaa, who in spite of the years of domestic life admired her husband as much as she had done on her wedding day.

Arjuna, all attention, said: 'We will conquer, as our noble father did.'

Nakula nodded agreement. Now there would be an opportunity for his horses to take part in a real war. Sahadeva remained as inscrutable as ever.

Yudhishthira saw how his brothers were looking forward to the *Rajasuya,* but he shuddered at the prospect of performing it; it would involve them in military campaigns against neighbouring kings and securing hegemony over them by force or the show of it.

Now that his mother had told him what his father's wish was, an insurmountable difficulty faced him. How could he, Yudhishthira, prevent that desire from growing into an irresistible demand?

That night, after retiring, Yudhishthira was uneasy. The *Rajasuya* occupied his mind completely.

He could not sleep. He stood on the terrace overhanging the river Yamuna. He looked at the Seven Primeval Rishis (Ursa Major), whirling in the sky, in mute appeal; he prayed to the Gods to show him the way. There was no response.

He stepped down from the terrace to the bank of the river. He was not quite sure whether he was awake or in a dream.

He took—or rather, followed—the path leading to the forest, which ran parallel to the river. He was going along, he did not know where. How far he went, he was not sure; he was equally unsure about the direction in which he was going. All he felt was that the *Rajasuya* had penetrated his mind.

The silence of the night was broken by a sweet melodious voice singing to the accompaniment of *tumboor*.

Without his being conscious of it, Yudhishthira's steps followed the direction from which the music came.

He saw a rock on the bank of the river, glowing with a blue light.

As he gazed at the blue light intently, he saw the figure of the musician emerging from it. He was seated on the rock, absorbed in playing music. Evidently he was a Muni.

Yudhishthira stood with folded hands. When the musician stopped singing, a change came over him, as the light encircling him shrunk into a halo around his boyish face.

'My salutation, Best of Munis,' said Yudhishthira and offered him salutation. 'Why do you sit here at this time of the night? I should feel thankful if you would come to my mansion'.

'No. I love to live in open spaces', replied the youthful ascetic.

'Where do you come from, Best of Munis?' asked Yudhishthira.

'My home is wherever I happen to be—in the Land of the Mortals, of the Ancestors and of the Gods, even in the Nether Regions,' replied the youthful Muni with a smile. His voice was sweet. 'For the moment I have come from the Land of the Ancestors to meet you', he added. His fingers flitted over the string of the *tamboor* lying on his lap, but strangely no sound came from it.

Yudhishthira was not sure whether he was awake or dreaming, but he would be wrong to enquire too much; if he did so, perhaps the Muni would disappear.

'Best of Munis', he said, 'now that you have come to our Land of the Mortals, let me know how I can serve you. I am the son of Pandu, the King of the Kurus'.

'I know you well, Yudhishthira', the Muni said. 'You can serve me better by listening to the message I bring'.

'A message from whom?' asked Yudhishthira.

'From your noble father, King Pandu'.

'My noble father!', exclaimed Yudhishthira. He pressed his temples. Was he awake or asleep? He asked:

'What is the message, venerable Muni?'

'Your noble father wants me to convey to you that he is unhappy'.

'What makes my venerable father unhappy and what can I do to relieve him?'

'The noble King Pandu has asked me to convey to you this message: "I conquered far and wide, commanded the allegiance of the Kings, but was unable to perform the *Rajasuya yajna*. You, Yudhishthira, are powerful, but you have not yet performed it. It is a duty which you owe me. Unless you perform it, I can have no place in the company of the *Chakravartis* who have, or whose sons have, performed *Rajasuya*".'

'*Rajasuya!*' exclaimed Yudhishthira mechanically.

'It is the primary duty of a son to make his father happy in the Land of the Mortals and also in the Land of the Ancestors'.

The halo of blue light was floating away. The Muni spoke as if from a distance: 'That is the message from your noble father: Perform *Rajasuya*'.

'But, but, ... ', Yudhishthira could not complete the sentence. There were echoes of the word "*Rajasuya*" from all quarters. He shuddered.

Yudhishthira rubbed his eyes; they were so tightly closed that it was difficult for him to open them. He shook his head, opened his eyes with an effort and found himself sitting on the bank of the river, his mind in confusion.

There was no Muni, no music, no blue light. Only his father's message "Perform *Rajasuya*" ran through the corridors of his mind. He rose and returned to the terrace and lay down to sleep, but could not close his eyes. Insistently his father's message echoed in his ears.

At the usual hour, as dawn broke, all the Five Brothers took their bath in the river, offered libation to the God Surya, chanted the prescribed *mantras* and performed *pranayam*—the yogic discipline of controlling the breath. He, Yudhishthira, did all these things mechanically, absent-mindedly.

After the rituals, Bhima came to him, placed his hands on his shoulder and said: 'Eldest, you appear to be unwell. What is the matter?'

'Nothing, Brother', replied Yudhishthira, with a forced smile on his lips.

'Something has gone wrong', insisted Bhima.

'Nothing, nothing. Only I did not sleep well last night', replied Yudhishthira.

At dinner time, as Mother Kunti, according to her habit, served the meal to her sons with her own hands, she observed: 'Eldest, what is the matter? You seem to be unhappy'.

Yudhishthira waved away the servants. When only the members of the family were left, Mother Kunti again asked: 'Why are you unhappy, my son?'

'I did not sleep well last night', replied Yudhishthira. He had to keep his lifelong pledge—never to utter an untruth. He cleared his throat and repeated: 'Nothing is the matter with me'. Then he lowered his voice and added: 'Only I received a message'.

'A message! From whom?' asked Mother Kunti with concern.

'From our noble father', replied Yudhishthira in a whisper, looking around to see whether any servant was within hearing distance.

Mother Kunti went pale. 'From your noble father?'

'Yes, Mother. Narada Muni gave me the message yesterday night', replied Yudhishthira.

Bhima shook his head to assure himself that he was not dreaming. 'Are you sure that it was Narada Muni?' he asked. 'I wish I had been there to find out who he was'.

'No doubt it was he, the conscience-keeper of the Gods, who roams over our Land of Mortals, the Heavens and the Nether Regions. I recognised him by his divine music'.

'And where is he now, lord?' enquired Draupadi.

'He gave the message and faded away', said Yudhishthira.

'Are you sure?' asked Bhima. 'You should have called me'.

'It was not like reality exactly. But I did see him, as I see you now. It could not have been a dream; it was so vivid'.

'What was the message?' enquired Mother Kunti.

The message echoed in his mind insistently. A little afraid, Yudhishthira replied: 'Our noble father wants us to perform the *Rajasuya yajna*'.

Tears sprang to Mother Kunti's eyes. 'Are you sure that it was a message from the lord?' she asked.

'Yes, so the Muni said. Unless we perform the *Rajasuya yajna*, our noble father will not find a place among the *Chakravartis* in the Land of the Ancients', said Yudhishthira.

'Are you sure that it was Narada Muni whom you heard, and no dream?' asked Arjuna. The idea of an unearthly visitation disturbed him.

'It was so real, Brother. I cannot say whether it was a dream or not, but I am sure, the message was from our noble father. Yesterday Mother told us that Father's only regret was that he had not been able to perform the *Rajasuya*'.

Seeing Yudhishthira so miserable, Mother Kunti, by a gesture, asked everyone to leave him alone and herself went out with them.

For a few days, Yudhishthira remained dazed. His father's Message was insistent. He could not shake it off.

On the following days, his brothers, mother, Draupadi and the other women-folk anxiously continued to observe the change in him; he appeared to be disconsolate. They did not know that no sooner did he think of the horrors of war, than the pressure of the Message increased.

On the sixth day, at a family gathering, when Yudhishthira was not his normal self, Bhima told him: 'Look here, Eldest, we were all thinking of performing the *Rajasuya*. Now that Father's Message has come, it must be obeyed'.

'Lord, we must perform the *Rajasuya*', Draupadi declared in agreement with Bhima.

Bhima was happy beyond words. 'It cannot be a dream. I am sure father must be unhappy at our foolishness in not performing the *Rajasuya*. We will now perform it'.

Arjuna was also happy at the prospect of performing the *Rajasuya*. It meant military campaigns—a change from the placid days they were having. He said: 'Father *must* have sent the message; he was such a great warrior'.

Yudhishthira turned to Nakula.

'We must celebrate the *Rajasuya*. A hundred war-chariots are ready to go on a conquering mission', said Nakula.

'Let us postpone the decision for a while', said Yudhishthira. 'I am not feeling quite equal to coming to a decision now'. He then turned to Sahadeva, 'What is your advice?' he asked.

Sahadeva, who rarely opened his lips, said: 'Leave it to Krishna.'

'I was just going to suggest that', said Draupadi.

Everyone felt relieved.

'It is only a few months since he went to Dwaraka', said Yudhishthira. 'He will be loathe to come again'.

Bhima turned to Nakula in mock anger. 'Nakula, you go to Dwaraka and fetch Krishna. Tell him, I won't leave him to himself in Dwaraka. If he says 'no', kidnap him in the same way as he kidnapped Rukmini'. He laughed aloud; he always enjoyed his own jokes. 'Your horses are becoming too fat munching gram the whole day, to be useful in a war. They need some exercise, and you also'.

'Let us invite the Master also', said Mother Kunti. 'Without his blessing, we cannot celebrate the *Rajasuya*'.

'Now, Sahadeva, we cannot leave you doing nothing here. You had better go to Dharmakshetra and invite the Master', said Bhima.

CHAPTER 3

RAJASUYA—TO BE PERFORMED OR NOT TO BE PERFORMED

ABOUT a month later, the Master, Krishna Dvaipaayana, accompanied by his disciples, arrived at Indraprastha by boat. A few days later, Krishna Vaasudeva also came from Dwaraka; he was accompanied by Uddhava and several *maharathis,* riding in chariots.

The town wore a festive look: the arrival of the two Krishnas—one revered, the other adored—was a rare event.

The Master naturally was the guest of his disciple, Acharya Dhaumya, the royal preceptor.

Krishna stayed in the royal mansions where all the Five Brothers with their families lived. He received an affectionate welcome.

After a while, the members of the family, other than the children, left. Soon Bhima returned to apprise Krishna of the situation. The children, however, would not let them be. The five sons of Draupadi, led by Prativindhya, the son of Yudhishthira, gave a boisterous welcome to Krishna. They would not leave him, for each one wanted Krishna to embrace him, and when Krishna did so, they danced for joy.

Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son by Subhadra, the younger sister of Krishna, jumped out of his mother's arms and would have fallen to the ground, had not Krishna caught hold of him.

Bhima was indignant. 'Krishna, stop humouring these little rascals. They love you more than they love us', he said.

'Then there must be something wrong with you', said Krishna. 'Isn't that so, Prativindhya?' he asked Yudhishthira's eldest son, who nodded assent.

'You are going against the ancient canons, Krishna', said Bhima. 'They prescribe that the father and the mother are gods, and not the maternal uncle.'

Krishna whistled and Abhimanyu smiled. Krishna pressed his cheeks. 'You love me more than you love your father and mother, do you not, little fat fellow?' He tickled the boy under his chin, and he responded by a broad sweet smile expressing his satisfaction by a gurgle. Krishna handed back the boy to his mother.

'They do not love me more than you do, Bhima. They only express their love for me, which you do not know how to express', said Krishna.

'Words, words, words', said Bhima in mock anger. 'I know how to express my love for you, but if I did, you might be smothered in my embrace and I do not want to kill you just now; the time may come when I will do so'.

'Try', replied Krishna. 'It may be that you would kill yourself'.

Everyone laughed. The children jumped for joy; it would be a great fun if father and uncle tried to kill each other.

The next day, after the morning rituals were over, a conclave was held in Acharya Dhaumya's *ashram* around the *vedi* (altar), on which the sacred fire had been lit and worshipped by the Master. Besides the Master and Acharya Dhaumya, Krishna, Uddhava, the Five Brothers, Mother Kunti and Draupadi were there.

There was an air of informality at this gathering. The princes were without their diadems, nor did they carry any arms, as was their usual habit. The Master had not even entwined his greying locks, which were spread over his back. Acharya Dhaumya, however, had entwined his locks, for he could not meet his *guru*—the Master—without doing that.

The Master was surprised at the transformation which had taken place in Krishna. His body was as smooth, his eyes as bright and expressive, and his look as youthful as ever. The Master had admired him, his sanity of outlook and his resourcefulness; however, a new dignity—or rather the majesty of a god—was stamped on his face.

The Master had been seriously perturbed at the misfortunes that had overtaken the royal houses of the Kurus time and again. His own words addressed to the venerable Mother, Satyavati, came to his mind again and again:

"Till I am called away by the Gods, I will live for *dharma*. And as the Kurus are not going to produce a *Chakravarti*, the God Surya will direct my steps to one born to be *Sasvat-dharma-gupta*, the protector of eternal *dharma*, who will root out the wicked and re-establish *dharma*. This will happen, I am sure."

They were prophetic words, he realised.

Where was the God Surya leading him to discover the defender of *dharma*?

The Master blessed Krishna. He suppressed a sigh. He could not help wishing that, if he had been born to a king, he might have possibly become a *Chakravarti*. An over-all authority in Aryavarta which could stand true to *dharma* was necessary, more so now than ever before.

However, he did not let his thoughts run their course. He must wait on events. The appointed man would come if and when the God Surya wished.

After a preliminary conversation, the Master said: 'Yudhishthira, let us know fully the situation which led you to call us. It must be a matter of great importance.'

'Not only of great, but of vital importance,' replied Yudhishthira. He could hear the swift whish of the Message as it took possession of his mind. 'We want your help in deciding the momentous question before us: should we or should we not perform the *Rajasuya?*' Then he narrated how his father's wish to perform *Rajasuya* in his lifetime had remained unfulfilled; how Narada Muni, the conscience-keeper of the Gods, had brought the message of King Pandu from the Land of the Ancestors.

After narrating the event, Yudhishthira could not express what he really felt; the Message rang out peremptorily and he had to submit to it. 'My brothers want our father's mandate to be obeyed.' Helplessly he added: 'And rightly.'

'What is your brothers' view?' asked the Master.

Bhima interjected: 'Master, we have conquered several kings. Our hegemony has been accepted by several others. We now want to perform the *Rajasuya*. We want your blessing and the advice of Krishna.'

The Master turned to Sahadeva with a smile. 'Sahadeva, you have the gift of prophecy, but you never open your lips unless a question is put to you. Has the auspicious moment come when your warriors can go into action?'

Sahadeva pointed a finger at Krishna and said: 'Ask him,' and then lapsed into silence.

'Now, what is the difficulty?' asked the Master.

'There is no difficulty,' replied Bhima. 'We want your blessing, venerable Master. If we perform the *Rajasuya,* you will have to preside over it.'

'Yes, you will have my blessing, and if need be, I shall preside over the *Rajasuya* as the *Brahmaa,*'[1] replied the Master.

'Venerable Master,' said Yudhishthira, 'do you think it desirable to hold the *Rajasuya*?'

'Not for the reasons that you think of, but for reasons of my own,' replied the Master.

'What are they, venerable Master?' asked Yudhishthira.

'The *Rajasuya* will bring together important *Srotriyas,* and wherever necessary, the chants of the *WORD* will be restored to their original perfection. And any deviation from righteous living will be corrected too. The authority of the *WORD* will be strengthened.'

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[1] One of the four principal ritualists at a sacrificial session.

'How long is it since you have taken part in one of the major sacrificial ceremonies?' asked Yudhishthira.

'I took an active part when the Emperor Shantanu celebrated the *Vajpeya* and I could see that its influence was felt for about twenty years. I was then about twenty years old.'

'But is it necessary to go to war only to have the satisfaction of performing the *Rajasuya*?' asked Yudhishthira.

'We don't want a war. But if the kings want to keep peaceful relations with us, let them accept our overlordship,' said Bhima airily.

Yudhishthira shook his head. Before the Message could take possession of him and force him to say what he did not feel, he asked: 'Is overlordship so important?'

He saw the eyes of everyone fixed on him in surprise. Was Yudhishthira going to disown faith in *kshaatra-dharma?*

'I am willing to fulfil the wishes of our noble father. We cannot but fulfil them. But, ...'

'No "buts", noble Eldest,' said Bhima sternly. 'Our father's mandate is peremptory. It has to be obeyed.'

So far, Yudhishthira had spoken haltingly under the pressure of the Message. Now it left him no choice. 'We *have* to obey the mandate of our noble father.' Then he muttered: 'But I hate wars.'

The Message would not leave Yudhishthira in peace; he made a declaration which he felt was not his: 'I know that the *Rajasuya* will bring back the erring kshatriyas to the path of *kshaatra-dharma*.'

'Most kings will accept our hegemony, for by overlordship we only want to ensure that they follow the path of *dharma*', said Bhima.

The Master held up his hand for a moment and then turned to Krishna and asked: 'Noble Vaasudeva, what do you think about it?'

Krishna adjusted his scarf and said: 'As the Master wishes'. He paused for a moment and continued: 'Venerable Master, the noble Yudhishthira has attained the position of a *Chakravarti,* but not the status.'

'That position is solely due to you, Krishna; I have had nothing to do with it,' Yudhishthira corrected.

Krishna laughed. 'Don't be unjust to yourself, Eldest,' he said and then continued in slow, deliberate accents: '*Rajasuya* is not merely a sacrificial session to please the Gods and fulfil our obligation to the ancestors. It will bring back the erring *Srotriyas* to austere living and the tradition of *kshaatra-dharma* will be strengthened.'

The Master nodded assent. 'You are quite right, noble Vaasudeva.'

Krishna continued: 'It will bring together not only *Srotriyas* and kings, but also ordinary men and women; they will realise that *dharma* alone will bring them happiness. It will rejuvenate the Aryas.'

Bhima burst out laughing. 'Krishna, I wish I could have recited the benefits of a *Rajasuya* as wonderfully as you have done. Then we would not have needed your presence here.'

Krishna also laughed. 'I am sure, you are not so selfish as to deny me the credit.'

Yudhishthira again felt the Message pressing on his mind. He could not but nod acquiescence. However, hesitatingly he observed: 'We must not forget the misery which a war will entail: loss of life, loss of wealth, the break-up of homes and the destruction of *ashrams.*'

Krishna gauged Yudhishthira's instinctive dislike of a war. Left to himself, the Eldest would not embark on a single military conflict.

'Brother,' said Krishna, 'you have truly described the effects of war. But we have to weigh them against the plight of men if sacrificial sessions like the *Rajasuya* are not held from time to time. *Dharma* would lose its supremacy over men; the kings would behave irresponsibly; righteous living would be forgotten; families would be broken up; the *Srotriyas* would give up austere living; the potency of the *WORD* would be lost.'

The Master looked at Krishna with admiring eyes; he himself could not have put it better. He was struck by the clarity of Krishna's mind. He sighed. The Yadava chief had all the attributes of a *Chakravarti,* the Protector of *Dharma.* Unfortunately, he was not a king, and no king would accept his overlordship.

CHAPTER 4

MEGHASANDHI'S MESSAGE

KRISHNA paused for a moment and continued: 'I take it that our military strength is adequate to win a war. But does it give confidence to the Rajanyas (kings and chiefs) that righteous living—*dharma*—can always overcome wickedness, *adharma?*'

'You are right, noble Vaasudeva', said the Master. 'That is why before *Rajasuya* is performed, we have to undertake military campaigns, not with a view to subjugating any Rajanya, but to secure his partnership in our moral guardianship'.

Krishna then turned to Arjuna and asked: 'Have you a strong band of chariot-warriors with their followers and master-archers?'

'Yes', replied Arjuna. 'We have twenty *atirathis* and forty-three *maharathis* ready with their full equipment and a following of archers'.

'What about you, Nakula?' asked Krishna.

'Our horses are in perfect condition, neighing impatiently for war,' replied Nakula.

Krishna, flashing a winning smile, turned to Arjuna and Nakula and asked: 'Are you sure that the military leaders who support you, are convinced that you are fighting for *dharma*, not for conquest?'

'We—I mean, all our military leaders—are inspired by a sense of a mission to maintain *dharma*, and in particular, *kshaatra-dharma*', said Bhima.

'We have already attained a high position among the Arya kings. Is that not enough?' asked Yudhishthira.

Krishna placed a finger on his chin. 'Eldest, when you have reached a certain eminence, you must be ready to reach out to a higher eminence; otherwise you will be torn to pieces,' he said.

Bhima could not but look with admiration at Krishna. 'That is exactly what I think. Our next step should be to extend our hegemony over kings who have not accepted our overlordship. We shall overcome all our enemies'.

'Can we not bring it about without a *Rajasuya*?' asked Yudhishthira. But he lapsed into silence as his father's Message seized his mind.

The Master said: 'Our forefathers who had the privilege of conversing with the Gods, set up divinely-ordained ceremonials to satisfy the Gods by oblations; to satisfy the forefathers by obsequial offerings; to fulfil the desire of kings to secure glory; to establish the unity between *brahma-tej* and *kshaatra-tej* and secure the triumph of *dharma*'.

After a little pause, he continued: 'I said, the military campaign which precedes the *Rajasuya* is not in the nature of a murderous war. It is only a step to attain moral hegemony'.

'That is all the more reason why you cannot celebrate *Rajasuya* without being sure of the support of the Rajanyas in different kingdoms,' said Krishna.

'That assurance can only come if you have made a successful military campaign', said the Master. 'The position is very delicate. In most cases the kings will accept your hegemony by joining the *Rajasuya;* if there is resistance, you will have to face them in battle. If you are defeated in such a military campaign, your influence will disappear, your power will disintegrate and the *Rajasuya* will recoil on you.'

'But, how can we be sure of victory, Master?', asked Yudhishthira. 'War is a game of uncertainty', he added, hoping that Krishna would provide him with some loop-hole to escape the Message.

'You must create the conditions on which your enemies will acquiesce to your hegemony under moral pressure without a conflict', said Krishna.

'Without a conflict!,' exclaimed Yudhishthira hopefully. 'How can that be?'

'Yes, without a conflict', replied Krishna.

'What are those conditions?' asked Bhima. 'We will create them, if necessary'.

'First, you must be ready to go to war, well equipped with arms, horses and chariots and having loyal adherents', said Krishna. 'That condition is fulfilled'.

Then Krishna turned to Draupadi and asked: 'What about your noble father?'

'Lord, Drupad, I am sure, will help us, so that the *Rajasuya* may be celebrated', replied Draupadi. She had a status of her own in the family; she was always present even when delicate matters were discussed, and her opinion always counted.

'What about your people? Will they give you their full support?' asked Krishna.

'Yes, they are loyal', replied Bhima.

'Can you depend upon their loyalty even if you receive a setback in one or two campaigns?' asked Krishna.

'I think we can', replied Bhima. 'But I can't imagine how we could suffer a setback.'

Krishna laughed. 'You always look at the bright side of a thing.'

'If I don't, you will all drown me in your tears', replied Bhima. He burst into mischievous, boyish laughter.

'What about your other allies?'

'Our allies are firm in their allegiance to us', said Bhima. 'Some may waver, but we can easily overcome them if they are foolish enough to resist us'.

'That means war,' said Yudhishthira.

'What about Sishupal of Chedi? He is your enemy. So are Dantavaktra of Karush, Bhagadatta of Pragjyotish, Rukmi of Vidarbha, and Paundraka Vasudeva. They are the allies of Jarasandha', said Krishna.

'We can easily defeat Sishupal and Dantavaktra', said Arjuna.

'That is not so easy, Brother', said Krishna. 'If you are engaged in a war against Sishupal and Dantavaktra, Jarasandha is sure to throw in his weight on their side. Also don't forget that your cousin, Duryodhana, bears no love to you. He might lend support to Jarasandha, even if the elders like Bhishma, Drona and Kripacharya disapprove of the step. Then there is Karna Radheya; he is waiting for a chance to fight you, Arjuna, and please his friend, Duryodhana.'

'What do you suggest?' asked Bhima. He was disappointed at Krishna piling one reason upon another against holding the *Rajasuya*.

Krishna was lost in thought for a while. Then he said: 'If you want me to be associated with the *Rajasuya*........'

'There is no 'if' in the matter. If you are not going to be associated with it, we are not going to celebrate the *Rajasuya*,' said Bhima. 'And I know you well enough. Once we start a war, you are sure to jump in to save us'.

'Then we must destroy Jarasandha. He is our bitterest foe, who would not stop at doing anything to destroy the Yadavas. You know that he destroyed Mathura to be rid of me, but could not find me. He came to kidnap Draupadi at the *swayamvara*, but he had to withdraw because of me'.

'How can we destroy Jarasandha?' asked Yudhishthira. 'He is far away. Even Susharma, the King of Kashi, Jalandharaa's brother, is mortally afraid of him'.

'You are right, Brother', said Krishna. 'When the sun comes into the constellation of *Makar* (Capricorn), Jarasandha will begin his preparations to hold a sacrificial session in which the heads of a hundred kings will be offered'.

'This is awful, if true,' interjected the Master who felt as if a blow had fallen on him. 'Are you sure that Jarasandha has decided upon this inhuman sacrifice?'

'The message was brought to me by Acharya Indrapramad, the disciple of Acharya Shvetaketu, who has an *ashram* near Kashi. It was from Prince Meghasandhi', replied Krishna.

'Yes, I know Acharya Indrapramad well', said the Master. 'Where is he?'

'He is on his way back to Girivraja to request Sahadeva and Meghasandhi to prevent the sacrifice from being offered till I reach there', said Krishna.

'This is unbelievable', said the Master, shaking his hand. 'It is un-Aryan, sinful, heinous. It is destructive of all that *dharma* stands for. It must be prevented'.

'Master, has there been any Arya King within your knowledge who has offered human sacrifice?' asked Krishna.

'Many, many years ago, an attempt was made by King Harischandra to offer Shunahshepa to the sacred fire, but the God Varuna released him. Since then, no Arya King has offered a man for sacrifice'. The Master's voice shook with indignation. He put his palms on his ears. 'Sacrificing a hundred Rajanyas is unthinkable. We must find a way to prevent it'.

'How can we take our army to Magadha and destroy Jarasandha?' asked Yudhishthira.

Bhima snapped his fingers. 'Like this. Our *maharathis* will be ready to finish off Jarasandha. Drupad is our relation and friend. So is the King of Kashi'.

'I doubt whether they will actively join you in the beginning', said Krishna. 'They will come to your help only when they find that you are likely to succeed'.

'To invade Magadha is no easy matter', said Yudhishthira. He was clinging to a last hope.

'What shall we do?' asked Bhima of Krishna.

'The only way open to us', replied Krishna, 'is the way that I suggest: to create a situation in which we can celebrate *Rajasuya* without risking a defeat. That is possible only when we are rid of Jarasandha'.

'All wars carry the risk of defeat', commented Yudhishthira.

'We must eliminate all chances of defeat before we embark upon the *Rajasuya'*, said Krishna.

Everybody was silent.

The Master then spoke: 'I will send a message to the kings and Rajanyas who look to me for guidance to be ready for a war against Magadha. But it is doubtful whether all of them will take the risk'.

The shadow of a deep anguish was on the Master's face. He added: 'It will be an unfortunate war—Arya kings pitted against Arya kings. On the other hand, if this human sacrifice is not stopped, the fabric of *dharma* will collapse. We shall be no longer Aryas but Rakshasas'.

Everybody was buried in thought.

'What does the noble Vaasudeva suggest?' asked the Master.

Krishna then spoke slowly, but with firmness. 'The message that I received was very clear. Prince Meghasandhi wants me to help him to stop this demoniac ceremonial'.

After a pause, he continued: 'Before Nakula arrived at Dwaraka to fetch me here, I had already sent a reply to Meghasandhi and his father, Sahadeva, the Crown Prince, that I was coming to the rescue of the Rajanyas'.

'Krishna', said Yudhishthira, 'it is not easy to lead an army to Magadha.'

Krishna smiled. 'That only means that we have to find a way to destroy Jarasandha without such a conflict'.

'But how is that possible?' asked Yudhishthira.

'It is open to you to keep yourself out of this venture. But no choice is left to me,' said Krishna. 'Meghasandhi appealed to me because he had confidence that I would not hesitate once *dharma* was in danger. He himself is afraid that his grandfather, in a desperate mood, will not hesitate to offer him and his father to the sacred fire'.

'What a madman!' said Bhima.

'Eldest, the choice is yours. I am going to Magadha straight from here. If you send Bhima and Arjuna with me, they will be helpful to me and your purpose of preparing the ground for *Rajasuya* will also be served', said Krishna.

Mother Kunti was horror-struck. 'What if something happens to you, Krishna, or to Bhima or Arjuna?' she asked.

Krishna smiled. 'At all times a true kshatriya must carry his head in the palm of his hand. Perhaps the three of us can achieve what three thousand *atirathis* cannot. We need your blessing and the blessing of the Master. I have my own accounts to square with Jarasandha. He has pursued me all my life. On several occasions I could have killed him, but I helped him to escape; I did not want to kill him in a personal quarrel. But this time, I will have no hesitation, for he is trying to uproot the very basis of Arya *dharma*, the sanctity of human life', he said.

'But your life is too precious, Krishna, to be wasted in this way', said Mother Kunti.

'Otherwise', said Krishna, 'if Jarasandha offers humans to the sacred fire, the whole structure of Arya life will be ruined'. He paused for a while and continued: 'With great difficulty, Meghasandhi has been keeping the number of kings at less than a hundred by letting one or two Rajanyas escape every time'.

Krishna then turned to the Master and said: 'If we do not return, then, Master, you are free to ask the Arya chiefs to invade Magadha. But I feel sure that we will not fail'.

The Master perceived Krishna's smile, his firm tone, his mien of irresistible dignity.

And as Krishna bowed his head, the Master blessed him by placing his hand on it. 'Noble Vaasudeva, if you succeeded in stopping this holocaust, verily I say that you are the *Sasvat-dharma-gupta* whom I have been seeking all the time'.

When Krishna and Bhima were leaving, Draupadi came out with them and told Krishna: 'Lord, bring back both the Brothers safely. Assure me, Krishna, that you will not return without them'.

Bhima burst into loud laughter. 'You have no confidence in your husband. Why don't you ask me not to return without Krishna?'

CHAPTER 5

THE THREE VISITORS

MAGADHA, over which Jarasandha held sway, was a fertile land watered by several rivers, amongst them the Ganga, which served as a broad river-way, making traffic by boat easy. The fertility of its soil and its hot water springs attracted people from all the neighbouring areas and even from far-off places.

Its capital was a large sprawling settlement around the rocky hill, Girivraja, which served as a citadel.

King Brihadratha, the father of Jarasandha, was an easy-going monarch. Under his rule, Magadha was a happy land, living in peace with its neighbours—Mithila and Kashi.

Jarasandha, when he succeeded his father, moved his residence from the royal mansion in the centre of the settlement to the citadel.

From the time he came to the throne, Jarasandha had two ambitions in life—one to conquer death and the other to be the master of the world.

He tried to fulfil his first ambition, to secure immortality, by becoming an irresistible athlete.

In one of his earlier campaigns, he came across the *mulls,* a community devoted to *mull vidya,* which they believed to be a religious rite to secure immortality.

Jarasandha brought them to Girivraja and organised them into a body of experts, giving them every facility to live comfortably.

He raised *Bahu Vidya* or *Mull Vidya*—body combat—to the status of an esoteric cult. The *mulls* were invested with priestly authority, with himself as the pontiff, the Lord Rudra being the presiding deity.

The sacred *mulls*, who were heavy of build, were a world in themselves. They were subservient to the will of Jarasandha, and were his comrades in developing *mull vidya*, terrorising the residents of the settlement and harassing the common people.

The sacred *mulls* also served as a secret service, an instrument to enforce Jarasandha's commands. Any act of disobedience or disloyalty to him immediately attracted their attention. This usually ended in a whipping, sometimes in a hammer blow from the Emperor's gigantic fist, cracking the victim's skull.

The *mulls*, with their families, lived at the foot of the hill, but three days a week each one had to serve the Emperor in the citadel. While they lived at the settlement, their duty was to spy on the kshatriya warriors and to extort money from the traders. Jarasandha would not hear any complaint against them.

Jarasandha's family lived in the royal mansion in the centre of the settlement. However, his son Sahadeva, and his three grandsons, Somahji, Marjari and Meghasandhi, had to wait upon the Emperor every day in the forenoon.

Whenever he was in the mood, he invited one of his queens to come and stay with him in the citadel. If a queen was chosen to come and live with him in the citadel, she felt like committing suicide.

The queen of the day would be brought up to the citadel in a litter carried by the *mulls* with a fanfare. When Jarasandha was tired of her, he would send her back in a litter quietly.

To realise his other ambition of becoming the master of the world, Jarasandha marched his army up and down, defeating kings or taking them captive, looting their treasuries, insisting on unquestioned allegiance.

He kept the captured Rajanyas (kings and chiefs) locked up in the citadel to be offered to the Lord Rudra.

Jarasandha had also forged a net-work of alliances with powerful kings like Sishupal of Chedi, Dantavaktra of Karush and Shalva of Saubha.

Jarasandha had consolidated his power over an important, vital sector of Aryavarta by giving his daughters in marriage to the Yadava king of Mathura, Kamsa. Kamsa had an ambition of his own and offered unquestioned loyalty to his master, hoping that some day he would inherit a part of his empire.

When Kamsa was killed by Krishna, it was an affront which Jarasandha could never forgive. He decided to take revenge on the Yadavas and their chiefs, Krishna and Balarama.

Jarasandha descended upon Mathura to punish Krishna and Balarama, but he found that they had fled and he could do nothing about them.

Krishna and Balarama returned to Mathura after a while. Once again Jarasandha led his army to Mathura, but when he arrived there, he found that the Yadavas, under Krishna's leadership, had already left for Saurashtra with all their chariots, horses, cows, stock of foodgrains, and movable possessions. He had to rest satisfied with reducing Mathura to ashes.

While Mathura was burning, the Lord Rudra appeared before him, pleased with his devotion. Jarasandha asked the Lord when he would become the *Chakravarti* of the world. The reply was 'when he could offer the heads of a hundred Rajanyas to the sacred fire'.

This was the occasion when he returned from Mathura, bringing a community of *mulls* to Girivraja, as a powerful weapon to crush all opposition or disobedience.

During the best part of the day, he worshipped the Lord Rudra and then wrestled with the sacred *mulls* appointed for wrestling bouts as the ritual for the day.

The citadel of Girivraja had an open-air shrine to the Lord Shankar as Rudra. Jarasandha, dressed in a lion's skin, would sit in the courtyard of the shrine, surrounded by the sacred *mulls* on duty there.

Jarasandha was a giant of a man. In spite of his age, he was the very embodiment of massive strength. His beard flowed like a river. He had powerful arms, his muscles were unshrunk, his breast very hairy, his eyes shaded by thick, white eye-brows.

For the moment, his eyes were pinned on the face of his youngest grandson, Meghasandhi, a handsome and well-built young man, who stood in front of him, expecting his grandfather to explode with wrath.

Being in charge of Girivraja, Meghasandhi was the only member of his family permitted to bear arms in the presence of Jarasandha.

'Fool,' shouted Jarasandha in a full-throated voice. 'Why did you allow the strangers to come into the town? What sort of men are they?'

'Lord, there are three of them. One is a giant, evidently an expert wrestler with a broad chest; his arms are as powerful as the trunk of an elephant.'

'And the other two?' asked Jarasandha.

'The other two are of medium-size. The taller of the two is wiry and strong. The third has a charming face with sparkling eyes and an attractive smile'.

'Why have they come here?'

'They said that they were *Srotriyas* and had come to Girivraja to pay their respect to the Lord,' replied Meghasandhi.

Meghasandhi knew that if his grandfather grew very angry, he might kill any one present to vent his temper. But, worse still, he might decide to offer his father, Sahadeva, himself and his brothers, whom he suspected of disloyalty, to complete the quota of a hundred heads of Rajanyas. However before Jarasandha could do this, Krishna Vaasudeva was to arrive.

'Did they attract any attention from the people?' asked Jarasandha with a frown.

'Yes, they did,' replied Meghasandhi.

'How do you know?'

'As they appeared strange, I remained with them all the time. They had applied sandal-wood paste all over their bodies and wore garlands of flowers. At the gates of the town, they broke the three drums which were being played to show the hour. When they passed along the streets, men and women came out of their houses to look at them in wonder. An *Atirathi* even invited them to dinner'.

'Were you at the dinner?'

'I joined them lest they might set up a conspiracy'.

'And after the dinner?'

'After taking their meal, they approached Girivraja; at the gates, they were stopped from proceeding further by the *mull* guards'.

'Order them to go away. If they won't listen to you, seize them and throw them down the hill,' shouted Jarasandha.

One of the sacred *mulls,* who had come with Meghasandhi, intervened: 'Lord, one of them appeared to be an expert in body combat. He said that as the Head of the Holy Order of the sacred *mulls,* the mighty lord should give him the honour of participating in the ritual combat'.

Jarasandha smiled; he was always ready to perform this worship of the Lord Rudra and never failed to wrestle with a visitor who claimed to be an expert; if the visitor came near to overcoming him, he would crush him in his arms regardless of the canons of the *Mull Vidya.*

'Very well,' said Jarasandha. 'Tell them that they will be lodged in the citadel till tomorrow morning. Give them food. After worshipping the Lord tomorrow, I shall wrestle with them. But warn them that I will, if any of them plays a foul trick, crush his bones by a fatal embrace, and kick his carcass down the hill'.

Suddenly, there were shouts and counter-shouts near the gate of the citadel.

Jarasandha turned to the *Mull-raj*, the Head Mull, sitting near him and asked: 'What is that noise for? Go and enquire. If the newly-arrived men create any mischief, bind them hand and foot'.

Before the *Mull-raj* reached the gates of the citadel, the three visitors had climbed the wall and were standing on the parapet, shouting slogans of victory. The tallest among them made challenging gestures by thumping his thighs with his palms in defiance.

This defiance was too much for Jarasandha. He rose from his throne and asked four sacred *mulls* to follow him. He approached the gate on which the three visitors had descended from the top of the parapet.

Jarasandha proceeded towards them and asked: 'Who are you and why have you come? Why did you defy my *mulls* and disobey my orders?'

'We entered your citadel this way to make it clear that only friends enter through gates; enemies jump over them. We are your enemies'.

Jarasandha roared with laughter. 'You, my enemies! I will crush you in a moment like flies. But are you worthy of entering the ritual *Bahu Vidya* with me? If not, you will have to wrestle with my *mulls*'.

'You want to know whether I am worthy of wrestling with you. That is strange. Surely you recognise me,' said Krishna. 'You have been seeking me all your life and now I have come to seek you'.

'I, seeking you!' Jarasandha asked indignantly, narrowing his eyes. 'Where have I met you?' he asked.

'Several times,' replied Krishna. 'Have you forgotten Gomantaka? I might have killed you then, but I let you go. Again you came to find me in Mathura, but could not; you had to vent your frustration by burning down the town'. Krishna added: 'It was a mortal blow to your conceit'.

Jarasandha laughed heartily. 'My conceit! You mean my faith in the Lord Rudra. That is never shaken'.

By a glance, the *mulls* who were standing there, sought permission from the master to finish off this presumptuous upstart, but Jarasandha, by a gesture, stopped them. He wanted to wreak his vengeance in his own way.

'Have you forgotten your visit to Kundinapura when I was welcomed by noble Damaghosh, the King of Vidarbha?' Krishna continued: 'Again I met you at Kampilya at the *swayamvara* of the Princess of Panchala. Under my advice, you had to leave the assembly of kings to escape incurring ridicule'.

Jarasandha stroked his beard thoughtfully; he had never forgotten the incident. 'That is an old story,' he said. 'You are lying. I left Kampilya because I thought it fit to do so'.

Jarasandha was for a moment inclined to order his *mulls* to tear Krishna to pieces. However, he did not do so; he felt he was being humiliated before them and the only way out he had was to humiliate Vaasudeva before them first.

'I remember you now,' said Jarasandha with a contemptuous laugh. 'You are the cowherd—and a coward too —who ran away from Mathura instead of facing me as a true kshatriya in the battlefield. How can I touch you with my sacred hands in the ritual body combat? Now that you have sought me, I assure you that I will not let you go alive'. He gritted his teeth.

Krishna laughed and said: 'When the time comes, my hands will not be so sacred as not to deal with you. But as at Princess Draupadi's *swayamvara,* I have come here to warn you, maybe for the last time: "Desist from offering human sacrifice and I will forgive you all your other acts of *adharma*".'

'Don't be presumptuous, cowherd. Who are you to tell me what *dharma* is? Who are you to forgive me?' asked Jarasandha.

'I am here to tell you what it is. You have kept 98 Rajanyas in prison and propose to offer their heads to the Lord Rudra when the quota of one hundred is completed. You are only waiting for the auspicious time when the Lord Surya (Sun) enters the *Makar rashi* (Capricorn). I am here to warn you not to do such a demoniac deed,' said Krishna.

Again the sacred *mulls,* by their look, sought permission of their master to dispose of Krishna, but Jarasandha stopped them. 'We should not kill a guest during the ritual before the Lord Rudra unless he resorts to some trick'.

Jarasandha could also see that the sacred *mulls* in their heart of hearts were enjoying the humiliation which was inflicted on him by this cowherd.

'Wait a little. I will deal with you. This time you will not escape me,' said Jarasandha.

Krishna said: 'I am ready whenever and wherever you wish'.

'Let me deal with this young man first,' Jarasandha turned to Arjuna and said: 'Do you want to wrestle with me, young man? But I do not wrestle with men who are effeminate as you are with golden rings in your ears. I will see that you are disposed of when the time comes'. Then turning to Bhima, he asked: 'Who are you?'

'I am Bhimasen, son of King Pandu and brother of King Yudhishthira of Indraprastha,' replied Bhima. 'You consider *Mull Vidya* sacred to the God of gods—the Lord Rudra.

So do I. I am ready to enter into a body combat with you. I promise you that your conceit will be broken'.

'Well, you are impertinent. Go now. Meghasandhi will look after you. We will meet here tomorrow after the morning ritual. Get ready to die if you play any tricks'.

Bhima smiled. 'It might be the other way about'.

Contemptuously, Jarasandha turned his back on the visitors and went towards the shrine. But the humiliation to which he had been subjected time and again by the cowherd began to smart as if an old wound had been opened.

CHAPTER 6

THE WRATH OF THE GODS

IN order to attract the people of Girivraja to witness his super-human powers, Jarasandha had it announced in the settlement that "the noble Lord of Magadha, the revered Head of the Cult of *Mull Vidya,* the mightiest of monarchs, the Emperor Jarasandha, will participate in the ritual of *bahu-yuddha* (body combat) tomorrow morning with Bhimasen, the son of noble King Pandu of Bharatas, who has arrived with his brother Arjuna and cowherd, Krishna Vaasudeva."

The announcement, inviting the residents of Girivraja to witness the ritual of body combat, created a terrific impact upon their minds. Strange rumours began to circulate in the settlement about this invitation, the like of which had never been made to the people before.

So far the *mulls* had seen to it that nobody dared to whisper a word against what Jarasandha said or did; if anyone ventured to do so, his bones would be broken by them and no complaint against them would be heard by the Emperor.

However, on account of the royal announcement, no one could stop the people from talking openly about the visitors. They had heard the name of Krishna Vaasudeva, the Yadava chief, who some years ago had killed Kamsa, the King of Mathura, and the Emperor's son-in-law.

The young looked forward to the event with enthusiasm and irrepressible curiosity, even some hope. The old believed that Jarasandha was immortal; no one could kill him, no one could match him in body combat; Bhimasen, the son of Pandu, however powerful he might be, was sure to be worsted in the contest and killed. They shook their heads dolefully; it was most unwise of Krishna Vaasudeva to have walked into the trap.

The Rajanyas of Girivraja, terrorised into submission by the *mulls,* were anxious to see how Jarasandha would fare at the hands of Krishna Vaasudeva, who was considered almost a god by the Aryas.

Whispers were going around that Prince Meghasandhi was planning some move; what it was, nobody could imagine and nobody dared discuss.

They had also heard—not without relish—the report of the conversation between Krishna and their dread Emperor. For the first time, they learnt from these reports that Krishna Vaasudeva had defeated Jarasandha at Gomantaka; that later, Krishna with the other Yadavas had escaped from Mathura, thus frustrating the purpose of Jarasandha's invasion and that Jarasandha had had to rest satisfied with burning down Mathura; that, also at the behest of Krishna, he had had to withdraw from the assembly of kings at the *swayamvara* of Krishnaa Draupadi, Princess of Panchala.

It was also reported that when they had met the day before, Krishna had asked Jarasandha to release the ninety-eight Rajanyas and give up the idea of offering them to the sacred fire. However, Jarasandha had rejected the request.

The next morning, all the *mulls,* with their tiger-skins, were on duty in the citadel as well as on the two sides of the path which led to it.

The whole of the settlement came to see the ritual—men, women and children. They did not want to miss such a unique and breath-taking occasion. They sensed the importance of the ritual; something frightful was going to emerge; Jarasandha was immortal, and that only meant the death of the three visitors.

All the kshatriyas attended the ritual of body combat bringing with them whatever arms they were permitted to carry on such occasions.

The spacious court-yard in front of the shrine was crowded. When Bhima, flanked by Krishna and Arjuna, stepped into it, there was first a hush, then a whisper of admiration. It was not difficult to identify Bhima; he was tall, stout and sinewy. There could be no mistake about Krishna Vaasudeva; his mien was so full of dignity; his skin as soft as of a young woman's; his smile was so charming. The third in the group, handsome and lithe, was surely Bhima's brother Arjuna, who was selected by Draupadi at the *swayamvara,* from which their Emperor had had to withdraw unceremoniously.

The heralds announced the Emperor's arrival. He was accompanied by the old royal preceptor, who looked at the visitors with pity; unknowingly they had walked into the arms of the God of death. The audience received the Emperor in silence, folded their hands and bowed their heads till they touched the ground.

As he entered, wearing a lion-skin, Jarasandha looked very formidable. His beard and long hair had been tightly plastered to his cheeks and head giving him the fierce look of a white-maned lion.

Bhima went to the wrestling pit, handed the deer-skin which he wore to Arjuna and stood ready, wearing only the girth.

Jarasandha walked majestically to the shrine to offer worship to Lord Rudra, his guardian deity. He prostrated himself before the deity, and poured water and placed flowers on the shrine.

By a gesture, Jarasandha asked Bhima also to offer worship to the Lord Rudra. Bhima came to the shrine and offered mute prayers, first to the Lord Rudra to give him strength, then to the Master to give him courage, and then lastly to his mother for her blessing. Then he glanced affectionately at Krishna and Arjuna, and was happy to find their response indicated that they had complete confidence in him. He was sure of justifying their confidence.

Then he stepped into the wrestling pit and slapped his thighs in defiance.

Jarasandha handed the lion-skin which he wore to the Head *Mull* and slapped his thighs in responsive defiance.

Immediately he jumped forward to contact Bhima. Bhima stepped away. For some time, they tried to contact each other, but did not succeed.

There was complete silence in the assembled crowd. Both the combatants were equally matched, both stout and stalwart and with arms displaying tense muscles.

In spite of his age, Jarasandha had the agility of a youth and the skill of a master. He could anticipate Bhima's every move and circumvent it.

After some skirmishes, they were locked in an embrace.

The combatants began to breathe heavily, Jarasandha more than Bhima. When he felt that his breath was running short, Jarasandha made an attempt to throttle Bhima, at the same time kicking him in the groin.

Bhima immediately saw how Jarasandha had changed his tactics and was now bent on killing him.

The combat was reaching a dangerous stage. Bhima glanced at Krishna, who silently tore a leaf from top to bottom. He took the hint. By a supreme effort, he felled Jarasandha to the ground, put one of his feet on Jarasandha's leg and caught the other in both his hands. Using all his muscular power, he began tearing Jarasandha's body apart.

A violent shriek issued from the Emperor's mouth, turned into a gurgle and died out abruptly. There was cracking of bones. Jarasandha was torn into two from the skull downwards. Bhima threw away the two halves of the redoubtable Emperor.

He felt relieved. He had won. But, when he looked at the bleeding halves of Jarasandha, his eyes protruded with horror. He could not believe what he saw. The two halves, though torn asunder and bleeding heavily, were rolling towards each other.

The two halves came together and became cemented to each other.

Jarasandha opened his eyes, sat up, shook his body, balanced himself on his legs and challenged Bhima to resume the combat.

Tottering with fatigue, Bhima felt nervous; evidently Jarasandha was immortal. He turned to Krishna before resuming the combat, which, he felt, would be his last. However, he saw Krishna, who was smiling at him, had a leaf in his hands; he tore it into two and threw the right one on the left and the left one on the right. Bhima understood the significance of Krishna's advice.

Waves and waves of strength surged through Bhima's body. He repeated the trick and again tore the body of Jarasandha apart. This time the right half was thrown on the left side and the left half on the right side. Each of the halves lay inert in pools of blood.

When Bhima saw that the two halves did not come together, he felt sure that Jarasandha, the favourite of the Lord Rudra, was now dead. Rills of perspiration ran down his body. Bespattered with blood, he climbed out of the wrestling pit.

Krishna came and embraced Bhima, who could not stand any longer and sat down where he was.

The crowd, in panic, began to run hither and thither. The women were in terror. The children began to weep, clinging to their mothers. Many rushed to the gates.

The sacred *mulls,* who could not believe that their master could die, realised that he was really dead and were in panic; they expected that the vengeance of the people of Girivraja would fall on them.

At a gesture from Meghasandhi, the kshatriyas sprang into action. With swords in their hands, they surrounded the *mulls,* no longer sacred.

As the people realised that their dreaded monarch was really dead and the hated *mulls* were rendered powerless, a sense of relief filled their hearts.

All along, Sahadeva had been hypnotised by his father's terror-striking behaviour. Arjuna, as instructed by Krishna, brought him to where they were standing. He fell at Krishna's feet. In a voice choked with emotion, he shouted: 'Victory to Krishna Vaasudeva'.

Krishna lifted Sahadeva and said: 'Your father was a great man, but he did not know how to use his greatness to uphold *dharma.* Combine your father's valour with devotion to *dharma.* As your first act in your career as the king of Magadha, release the Rajanyas.'

Sahadeva called for Jarasandha's chariot and with Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna, drove to the top of the hill where the Rajanyas were kept prisoner. Seeing Krishna, the *mulls* guarding the caves ran away. Then the caves were opened and the captive Rajanyas released. Their joy was unbounded. With tears in their eyes, they saluted the heroes when they were informed by Arjuna that Jarasandha was no more and that Sahadeva was now the King of Magadha.

Meghasandhi and his brothers and the hierarchs of the kshatriyas took the halves of the dead body of Jarasandha to the funeral ground and cremated it with due ceremony.

No one felt unhappy at Jarasandha's tragic death. He had lived by terror and invited the wrath of the gods.

The inhabitants of Girivraja breathed freely. The shadow of terror, under which they had lived for decades, had disappeared.

The *mulls,* deprived of their protector and the sanctity surrounding them, promptly sensed the danger of being massacred by the kshatriyas. They fell at the feet of Bhima and begged of him to allow them to go to their own country.

Bhima expansively said: 'Don't worry. I will give you my word: no harm will come to you. But, why not come with me to Indraprastha? I have got the finest *mulls* and wonderful akhadaks.* Baliya, the toothless, is our *mull-raj* (*Head mull*).'

'Baliya of Hastinapur? We have heard of him,' said the head *mull.*

'You will soon meet his grand-son, Gopu, who is my mull-brother,' said Bhima. 'Come to Indraprastha'.

'We will, we will,' shouted the *mulls* with one voice.

Sahadeva knew that the kshatriyas of Girivraja were determined to put the *mulls* to the sword. So he tried to intervene. 'They have been the cause of all our troubles,' he said.

Bhima, affectionately patting Sahadeva on the back, said: 'The cause of all this is gone. If the *mulls* have to be put to the sword as instruments of Jarasandha, your father, then you will have to be put to the sword too; you were also his agent. Forget him and forgive all his instruments. Begin your reign auspiciously by proclaiming an amnesty for all. You should announce that those *mulls* who want to leave Girivraja can leave with their dependents and possessions'.

Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna stayed in Girivraja as the guests of Sahadeva till the obsequial ceremonies for Jarasandha were over. In the meantime, they were joined by the Yadava and Bhaarat *maharathis,* who, under the leadership of Uddhava, had stayed back in Videha, near enough to intervene, if necessary.

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*Wrestling pits, now called *akhadas.*

Messages were sent to the kings of the adjoining countries—Jarasandha was dead; Sahadeva had been crowned King of Magadha; the Rajanyas had been released from captivity; Krishna Vaasudeva had worked the miracle of stopping the human sacrifice.

During this period, they came—the residents of Girivraja as well as of the neighbouring areas—to have a *darshan* of Krishna with such presents as they could afford and to see the great hero who had killed the invincible tyrant. The *Srotriyas*, most of whom were in hiding or had crossed over to Kashi or Videha (Mithila), came to offer blessings to Krishna and to the great Bhima, Arjuna and Sahadeva (son of Jarasandha).

CHAPTER 7

BHIMA PLANS A DIGVIJAYA

SAHADEVA and his sons promised to attend the *Rajasuya* at Indraprastha. Meghasandhi, who carried the rich presents which Sahadeva had made to Yudhishthira, accompanied Krishna and the two Brothers all the way to Indraprastha.

The three leaders, Uddhava and the *maharathis* rode in chariots. The Rajanyas rode in chariots or vehicles drawn by bullocks. The *mulls* travelled on foot or in bullock-carts with their families. It looked like the triumphal procession of a victorious army.

The great news of the defeat and death of Jarasandha, considered immortal so far, and of the release of the ninety-eight Rajanyas, carried from mouth to mouth, attracted crowds by the road-sides to receive a *darshan* from the heroes.

Susharma, King of Kashi and the brother-in-law of Bhima, and Drupad, the King of Panchala and the father of Draupadi, gave a royal welcome to the heroes on their way to Indraprastha. Dhrishtadhyumna, the Crown Prince of Panchala, joined them in their journey to Indraprastha.

The crowds gathered on the out-skirts of Indraprastha to give a tumultuous welcome to the heroes. Tears were in Yudhishthira's eyes when Krishna fell at his feet. Krishna had secured for him imperial status without a military conflict.

The Master was also present. As soon as the news of the great victory reached Yudhishthira, he had invited the

Sage to grace the occasion of the return of the heroes.

When the Master returned to Dhaumya's *ashram*, he was lost in thought. Human sacrifice was the grossest of all sins, the most offensive in the eyes of the sages. The thought that Jarasandha was going to perform the human sacrifice of a hundred Rajanyas had caused him anxious days and nights. At one time he had thought of going to Jarasandha himself and courting death at his hands, but the Gods had not consented to his desire. The Lord Surya (the Sun God) had given a mandate that he should go in search of a proper person who would prevent the human sacrifice.

For the last two years, the Master had been seriously concerned at the failure of the Kuru House to give forth a potential *Chakravarti*. He had prayed again and again to the Lord Surya in the terms of the mystic chant, the *Gayatri*, to send a *Sasvat-dharma-gupta*, a defender of eternal *dharma*, who would provide a structure of power to uphold the *dharma* which he had built.

The Master had already been deeply impressed with Krishna's personality; with his graceful body; with that face of his which could smile, frown or inspire with marvellous effect; with his eloquence; with his unerring judgment of men and situations; with his resourcefulness ready to meet every crisis; and, above all, his passionate faith in *dharma*.

When he received the news of Jarasandha's death and the release of the Rajanyas, the Master had instinctively sensed that Krishna had become the architect of a new age for Aryas.

Even in his eyes, Krishna was a god. He had thwarted the attempt of Jarasandha to hold a human sacrifice, as Lord Varuna—the mightiest of Gods—had done ages ago when Shunahshepa was being offered as a sacrifice by King Harischandra.

When Krishna prostrated himself before him, the Master, departing from his usual manner of blessing, lifted

Krishna in his arms, as if putting a seal on the gift given to him by the Lord Surya (the Sun God). The Master had been in search of a *Sasvat-dharma-gupta*. The search had ended; *he had come*.

Three days later, the Five Brothers, Krishna, Uddhava and Satyaki, Dhrishtadhyumna and also the Master and the royal preceptor, Dhaumya, met to take stock of the situation.

'Now, what shall we do next?' asked Yudhishthira.

Bhima's exuberance knew no bounds. 'You need not worry, Eldest. Everything that was required to be done has already been done. We have not wasted the three weeks we spent in travelling from Girivraja to Indraprastha'.

'What have you decided?' asked Yudhishthira.

'The revered Drupad of Panchala has sent Dhrishtadhyumna to help us. Susharma of Kashi, Sahadeva of Magadha, and Shalya of Madra are already preparing a contingent each to form part of our army. Krishna has also agreed to bring select chariot-warriors', replied Bhima.

'Why do you want such a powerful force for peace?' asked Yudhishthira. 'I do not relish the amassing of such military might. It might provoke war'.

'In a fortnight's time, we will succeed in gathering two hundred *maharathis* and twenty *atirathis* at least', said Bhima. His eyes twinkled merrily, he rubbed his hands as if congratulating himself. 'I forgot to tell you that a small contingent of Rakshasas is also coming'.

Everyone, except the Master, was shocked.

'Rakshasas!' exclaimed Yudhishthira.

'Yes, led by my son, Ghatotkacha'.

Bhima had a broad smile on his face. He said: 'You will find his face rather fearful to look at, but he has a very kind heart. Every year he sends me word that he would like to come and pay his respects to me'.

'Ghatotkacha! What will he do?' asked Yudhishthira, stunned.

'He will deal with those Rakshasa enemies of ours', replied Bhima.

'But his people are cannibals. They will pollute the sacred fire'. Yudhishthira shook his head in despair at his brother's impossible plans.

'I have conveyed to his mother that neither Ghatotkacha nor his warriors must touch human flesh or pollute the sacred fire. Ghatotkacha has sent a reply: "I obey, father".'

Then Bhima burst out laughing, looking at the Master mischievously. He continued: 'The venerable Master also knows him well. When I kidnapped him, the Master mothered him'.[1]

The Master burst out into a fit of laughter. Others joined him.

Bhima continued: 'Ghatotkacha has such a good nature that, I am sure, Eldest, when you meet him, you will fall in love with him'. Then he laughed mischievously and added: 'He is so much better than myself.'

'But I am very much worried, Bhima. What does all this force which you have collected mean?'

'It is going to be a *Digvijaya,* a conquest of the world', said Bhima. 'I have not killed Jarasandha in order to suffer defeat at the hands of his henchmen. Don't forget that Sishupal, Dantavaktra and Shalva—all friends of Duryodhana's—are our determined enemies, Jarasandha or no Jarasandha. I want to gather sufficient military strength to prevent them from threatening our Indraprastha'.

'Please, please, Bhima, don't prepare for war', pleaded Yudhishthira.

'What am I but a kshatriya?' urged Bhima. 'I live by *kshaatra-dharma.*' He paused and continued: 'If you don't prepare for war, you will have no peace'.

'Bhima, please listen to me. Our *Rajasuya* does not mean conquest. Thanks to you, we have secured the triumph of *dharma* without shedding blood', said Yudhishthira.

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[1] Vide Krishnavatara, Vol. III, "The Five Brothers".

'We shed any amount of blood. When Jarasandha was torn to pieces, torrents of blood came from him', said Bhima, laughing. He then added in a serious tone: '*Dharma* requires that those who stand for evil must be destroyed to let righteous living triumph'. He paused for a moment and continued in a mocking voice: 'I know what you want, Eldest. What you want is peace—peace at any price, even if you have to give up Indraprastha to Duryodhana, and us too!'

'Don't be harsh', interjected Yudhishthira with a conciliatory smile, which, however, made no impression on Bhima.

'Harsh!' exclaimed Bhima contemptuously. 'My tongue is not a slave to untruth; it is the weapon of truth', he spoke in a serious tone, his face flushed. 'And I tell you that there is going to be no peace for us till Duryodhana is destroyed—destroyed by us or by his wicked actions—and till Shakuni, the viper, is wiped out of existence. If they force a war on us, I propose to win it, whatever it costs'.

'Be patient, Bhima, and listen to me', said Yudhishthira, with an indulgent smile. 'Do you know what a fratricidal war will cost?'

Bhima's eyes were blazing. He stood up. 'And do you realise what submission to Duryodhana means?'

Yudhishthira became paternal. 'Bhima, don't be angry. If you harbour anger, how can we make friends with the sons of our uncle Dhritarashtra? Sit down and listen to me. Is it not our duty to cement family ties, to invite our cousins in a manner befitting their status? They may be wicked, but we will conquer their wickedness by our righteousness'.

Bhima said sarcastically: 'Why not send a special invitation to Shakuni? As our arch enemy, he deserves the honour'.

'I propose to do so', replied Yudhishthira. 'Perhaps if he comes here and sees the love we bear to Duryodhana, he may change'.

'You have always been kind to our enemies, but never to your friends', said Bhima sarcastically.

'Don't be angry, Bhima', said Yudhishthira. 'After the tremendous success which you have achieved, he will see the futility of his efforts to destroy us'.

'He won't be won over; he will not appreciate our invitation. He will never be able to see the strength and prosperity we have built up without trying to find ways to filch them'.

Krishna intervened. 'King Vrikodara, please sit down. Have patience with us. The Eldest only wants an opportunity to win over Shakuni and Duryodhana by a righteous approach. You know that for his righteous ways, they call him "Dharmaputra" '. He paused.

Bhima looked at Krishna contemptuously. 'Krishna, you also have lost your sanity', he said.

'I entirely agree with you, Bhima. Nothing that the Eldest does is going to tame Shakuni's ill-will', said Krishna.

'You know what Shakuni is, Krishna', said Bhima. 'He is all poison; if you squeeze him dry, you will get enough poison to drown the world. What has he not done to destroy us?'

Bhima poured forth the bitterness of his heart.

'They tried to drown me when I was a boy. They tried to burn us alive in Varanavata. We had to spend years of our unhappy lives in the forest to escape their murderous designs. They have deprived the Eldest of the throne of our ancestors'.

Bhima paused, and, raising his fore-finger in warning, added: 'Listen, Eldest. They are out to destroy us. They want our Indraprastha, not by force because they cannot win it, but by guile'. He was silent for a while.

'My beloved brother', said Yudhishthira. 'What they may do is irrelevant; what is important is to see what we can do to them. We will send a special invitation to Shakuni'. He paused for a while and added: 'Don't forget that Duryodhana also has a grievance: but for the fact that his father was born blind, he would have succeeded to the throne of the Kurus'.

Bhima snorted like an angry war-horse and said: 'I am not going to sit idle. I am going to fight for our existence, for your kingship, for the heritage of our children, for the happy world that we have created here, and for *kshaatra-dharma*, which we uphold.' He took a long breath and added: 'My path I have chosen. I have enough warriors to overwhelm Hastinapura, if necessary.'

Yudhishthira tried to interrupt, but by an angry gesture, Bhima asked him not to do so. Then he continued: 'I have already begun to mobilize the contingents; we will have a *Digvijaya* whether you like it or not. And I swear by my sacred thread that I will wipe out Duryodhana, Shakuni and all their friends, if they come in our way'. Announcing this decision, Bhima thundered out of the room.

Yudhishthira perceived that his other brothers too were for Bhima's way of doing things. He also felt that he had done a great injustice to Bhima, who loved him so much; he was so brave, so loving and so considerate; there could be no parting of the ways between them.

The Master, who had sat silent so far, intervened. Turning to Krishna, he said: 'Noble Vaasudeva, go and tell him that the Eldest leaves the whole *Digvijaya* campaign to him. He has his blessing too'.

CHAPTER 8

A STRANGE ARRIVAL

AFTER all the plans were finalised, Krishna went back to Dwaraka to give the glad tidings to the Yadavas that the Emperor Jarasandha was no more.

With the elimination of Jarasandha, the balance of power was completely altered. Those who had looked to him for support felt helpless.

The Five Brothers emerged as a strong, unchallengeable power in Aryavarta. They were closely allied to the Kings of Panchala, Kashi and Madra and the Yadavas of Dwaraka.

The Master, worshipped as the source of *dharma*, had blessed them. Above all, the active leadership of Krishna, who had acquired a divine status in the popular mind, had given the Brothers a reputation for being invincible.

The four Brothers, with their respective contingents, proceeded to give Yudhishthira's greetings to the kings and invite them to attend the *Rajasuya*. If the invitation was received in a spirit of friendliness, the presents given to Yudhishthira were accepted. If, however, there was hesitation in responding to the invitation, the contingent's presence played a decisive role.

Most of the kings welcomed Yudhishthira's friendship. A few had to be fought and subdued before they would do so. A small number of kings like Dantavaktra of Karush and Bhagadatta of Pragjyotish, accepted Yudhishthira's hand of friendship only after they had suffered heavily in battle.

Yudhishthira's fears of a conflict with the kings disappeared. He was happy that the *Rajasuya* would be performed in an atmosphere of cordiality, strengthening the rule of *dharma*.

He had concentrated all his energy on inducing people to take to righteous living. He was fair, just, generous and charitable; he had active sympathy for the poor and the afflicted.

His righteous rule was reflected in the material prosperity of the kingdom. There was no drought and there were no floods. The rains came plentifully and the earth yielded abundant crops. Learning flourished. The cow, the mother of plenty, and the woman, the mother of men, were protected. Yudhishthira came to be called, at first, *Dharmaputra*, the son of *Dharma*, and later *Dharmaraja*, *Dharma* incarnate.

The disciples of the Master carried his blessing to the Acharyas of the different *ashrams*, inviting them to attend the *Rajasuya*. The great Master himself was going to preside over the ritual as *Brahmaa;* nothing would, they felt, be more appropriate.

The Acharyas who specialised in *Shrauta* doctrine and ceremonies were full of enthusiasm; most of their difficulties would be solved by the Master during the *Rajasuya*.

Maya, the Asura—who had once lived in the Khandava forest, and when it was burnt down, surrendered himself to Krishna—was, under his saviour's advice, building a *Sabha* for Yudhishthira, such as had never been seen before in any of the three worlds.

The four Brothers began to arrive from their respective tours bringing presents of gold and silver, cows, elephants and horses from friendly kings.

Arjuna, with his contingent, had penetrated deep into the Himalayan regions right to Mansarovar in the north. Nakula in his tour in the west received tributes from even the Mlechha kings living on the shores of the sea.

Bhima's *Digvijaya* campaign in the east was very successful. His greatest achievement was to win the friendship of Sishupal of Chedi, who had been a loyal ally of Jarasandha and was now in search of an alliance which would make him more powerful than before.

Bhima soon found a way to win the good graces of Sishupal. Repeatedly he said: 'We are cousins, noble Sishupal. Venerable Shrutasravaa, your mother, and my mother, Kunti, who are sisters, would be happy to see us friends'.

Sishupal hoped that by cultivating the friendship of the Five Brothers, he would win them over to his side against his inveterate enemy, Krishna. At the *Rajasuya,* he would be the most formidable guest and would use the occasion for securing greater power.

When Sahadeva returned from his tour in the south, as was usual, the *Srotriyas,* the Rajanyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, all gathered to welcome the conquering hero.

But they gasped at seeing a strange fearful creature seated next to Sahadeva in the chariot. Dark as ebony, the young man-mountain had a wide mouth, powerful jaws from which two canine teeth protruded, a copper-coloured sparse beard and a huge hairless head which was covered by a diadem of gold. He carried a wooden club, fitted with rings, armlets, necklaces and a waist-band of gold, and had painted himself with vermilion.

As he jumped out of the chariot, his glance roamed over those gathered to welcome Sahadeva, to find his father. His father had left his mother when he was a child, but she had given him a vivid description of the formidable King Vrikodara who had won her love.

His gaze fastened on Bhima; he appeared to be the only person there whom his mother's description would fit. Ignorant as he was of the Arya ceremonial way of receiving honoured guests, even though the *Srotriyas* were still offering welcome to Sahadeva by chanting *mantras* with copper pots in their hands, he like a mad bull, charged forward and fell at Bhima's feet shouting: 'Father, father,' and lifted one of his (Bhima's) feet and placed it on his own head.

Everyone was frightened to see this strange creature behaving so unceremoniously. Arjuna took his bow from his shoulder and got ready to let fly an arrow if he showed any murderous intentions.

Bhima lifted the monster from the ground and folded him in his arms.

'Father', said Ghatotkacha in Rakshasi language.

'How did you recognise me?' asked Bhima in the same speech.

'You are just as mother described. And she asked me to greet you by placing your foot on my head'.

Bhima said: 'Ghatotkacha, fall at the feet of the Eldest', pointing to Yudhishthira.

Ghatotkacha could not help muttering: 'Mother asked me to fall at your feet only. He is so small'.

'First fall at the feet of the Eldest', Bhima said peremptorily. Ghatotkacha shrugged his shoulders. 'All right, I will do it', he muttered.

There was a hush. People parted to make way bending low with folded hands. Bhima grasped one of Ghatotkacha's arms and told him to fold his hands.

The young Rakshasa did not know how to fold his hands and Bhima had to adjust his palms before they could be brought under control.

'What is the matter?' Ghatotkacha asked his father.

Bhima replied: 'The venerable Muni is coming. Pay your respects to him'.

'Mother gave me to understand that you were the greatest man in the world,' said Ghatotkacha.

'I agree with your mother', Bhima admitted indulgently. 'But we can't convince these people all at once'.

Ghatotkacha immediately realised that the Master was the old man who, his mother had told him, had taken away his father from her.

Bhima whispered to Ghatotkacha that he must fall at the feet of the Master.

Ghatotkacha grumbled: 'Mother can't be wrong'.

'Fall at his feet,' said Bhima patting him on the back.

'All right, all right,' grumbled Ghatotkacha. 'Mother says: don't do so. Father says: do so. What am I to do? Well, father is present here and mother is not. So I will obey him'.

As Ghatotkacha tried to offer a salutation by prostrating himself, untrained as he was to such a ceremony, he tumbled over. The diadem which he was wearing on his hairless head, fell off.

When they saw Ghatotkacha was trying to catch it, himself laughing, everyone caught the infection and began to laugh.

Yudhishthira, perhaps for the first time in his life, laughed like a little boy, caught the diadem and tried to put it on the hairless head of this strange addition to his family.

Still laughing, Ghatotkacha turned to his father and said in Rakshasi: 'That uncle,' he pointed a finger at Sahadeva—he delighted in mischievously calling Sahadeva 'that uncle'—'said I must wear it, because I am the son of King Vrikodara. If mother had been here, she would have thrown it away. But everybody here says 'obey' and Ghatotkacha obeys'.

Bhima translated what the young Rakshasa had said.

Yudhishthira said, turning to Bhima, that Ghatotkacha need not wear the crown. 'We shall make him another one'.

When this was translated to Ghatotkacha, he said turning to Yudhishthira: 'This uncle is more sensible than that one', pointing to Sahadeva.

When this was translated, Ghatotkacha turned to his father and grumbled: 'It was that uncle,' he pointed to

Sahadeva, 'who forced me to put on this thing. I have no hair on my head as you all have. Perhaps my hairless head might be considered as a diadem I am born with'. He laughed at his own joke; so did the others when Bhima translated this remark.

Immediately he was surprised to hear the Muni addressing him in his own language. 'My son, I am glad you are here. You were in my lap, drinking milk and honey when I last saw you. My blessing'. The Master patted him on the back and extended his hand in blessing.

The young Rakshasa handed over the diadem to his father and prostrated himself, and Bhima had to help him to rise.

'How did you fare, my son?' the Muni asked. 'You were asked to go to the land of the Rakshasas across the sea to make friends with its kings. What did you do there?'

Ghatotkacha began to like the Master. 'Oh! That uncle there,' he again pointed to Sahadeva, 'sent me to Lanka to make friends with the Rakshasa king. I went; I told them how powerful my father was; how nice my uncle ruling over Indraprastha was.' Then he looked at Sahadeva whimsically and said: 'That uncle there tutored me properly. The King then gave all kinds of presents—baby elephants, ivory and many things, I forget how many'.

After the elders except Bhima had left, Ghatotkacha became the centre of interest; the baby giant had made a great impression upon the youngsters. The sons of all the Five Brothers, who clustered round Bhima, asked: 'Is he our brother of whom you told us?'

'Of course, he is,' replied Bhima. He then turned to Ghatotkacha and in the Rakshasi speech said: 'These are all your brothers'.

'Are all these my brothers!' exclaimed Ghatotkacha. 'And all so little'. The young Rakshasa was so tickled at having these tiny boys as his brothers, he could not help laughing.

Bhima took Ghatotkacha to the women's apartment and introduced him to Draupadi and Jalandharaa. 'These are your mothers'.

The young Rakshasa was again overcome by a fit of laughter. He thought the whole thing was a joke.

'These are my mothers!' exclaimed Ghatotkacha. 'Ha, ha, my little mothers. I had one mother,' he began to count on his fingers. 'This is the second mother. That is the third mother. The other women sitting here are all my mothers?' Again he burst into explosive laughter; all this was a huge joke.

'Now don't laugh too much. You will burst,' said Bhima patting him on the back.

'I have been laughing all the time that I have been here'.

'For the moment, three mothers are quite enough for you', said Bhima joining Ghatotkacha in his laughter.

Then Bhima took him outside and went to another part of the mansion where the young princes slept.

'Is he going to sleep here with us? Supposing he becomes hungry and eats us up?' inquired Sutrasoma.

'Ghatotkacha,' said Bhima, explaining in Rakshasi, 'they enquire whether, while they sleep here with you, you will eat them up?'

Ghatotkacha laughed. 'Mother said: don't eat men. I obeyed. Father says: don't eat men, I obey. But I won't sleep here with my little brothers on the ground. I will only be comfortable sleeping in a tree'.

'Do what you think best,' said Bhima. Turning to the other princes, he said: 'Ghatotkacha is a very kind-hearted boy, but you should remember that he is not accustomed to our ways'.

After some time, Bhima came to see whether he was comfortable.

On seeing his father, Ghatotkacha slid down to the ground. 'Father, mother wanted me to tell you something when we were alone'.

'All right, let us go and talk,' said Bhima.

When they came away from the other princes, he whispered into Bhima's ear. 'Have you any enemies, father?'

Bhima could not help laughing. 'Oh, I have enemies all round'.

'Point them out to me tomorrow'.

'Why do you want to know my enemies? You had better think of my friends.'

'No, mother has asked me to kill all your enemies and I must obey'.

'Oh, Great God!' exclaimed Bhima. It would be a tragedy, he thought, if the young Rakshasa decided to go about killing all and sundry.

Bhima patted the young Rakshasa on the back. 'Don't worry about my enemies. Prativindhya and Sutrasoma will always be with you.'

'But I have to obey mother. She said I should kill your enemies,' insisted Ghatotkacha.

'But you yourself said some time back that you will obey your father as he is here. Therefore, you must obey me'.

'All right. If that is what you say, I obey you. Now, may I go up the tree to get some sleep?' said Ghatotkacha.

CHAPTER 9

AGRAPUJA TO SHREE KRISHNA

ACCORDING to Yudhishthira's instructions, Sahadeva sent messengers to the kings and invited the *Srotriyas*, Rajanyas, leading traders, agriculturists and Shudras to attend the *Rajasuya*.

Nakula was specially sent to Hastinapura to invite the Kuru elders and other prominent members of the family.

Before the session began, the venerable Mother, Vatikaa, the spouse of the Master, the Kashi princesses and Mother Sharmi arrived with all the daughters-in-law who had been sent to bring them.

Mother Sharmi, though old, soon bustled her way into becoming the chief organiser of the kitchen arrangements.

The Master arrived, accompanied by hundreds of *Srotriyas* who could conduct the *Rajasuya* with appropriate chants and ceremonies.

Susharma, the best of *Srotriyas*, took charge of the ceremonials connected with the Sama Veda. Yagnavalkya, who was the best ritualist in Aryavarta, was nominated the *Adhvaryu*. Dhaumya and Paila, the disciples of the Master, were nominated *Hotas*.

The *Srotriyas* divided themselves into separate academies, and after the daily ceremonies were over, discussed intricate points of doctrine and ceremonial. The *Srotriyas* were housed in new houses, constructed for them.

Every day crowds came to listen to the different *Srotriyas* who recited the glorious deeds of heroic ancestors. Dance and song also provided an attraction for the thousands of sightseers.

The dining halls, under the control of Mother Sharmi, provided rich food for all, including the poor and the destitute. The Master, as was his habit, took his meal after the children were fed.

The royal guests began to arrive, each with his own retinue of *maharathis*. Sishupal of Chedi and Dantavaktra of Karush arrived with a large retinue of *maharathis*. Sishupal acknowledged the cordial salutation of Yudhishthira haughtily and without cordiality.

Krishna arrived with his father, Vasudeva, his brother, the mighty Balarama, and other Yadava chiefs. Yudhishthira received them affectionately, happy at the thought that, without a war, Krishna had obtained for him the friendship of so many leading kings from all parts of the country from the Himalayas to the shores of the sea.

From Hastinapura came his venerable Grandfather Bhishma; Dhritarashtra; the highly respected Minister Vidura; Duryodhana and his brothers; King Sabal of Gandhara and his son, Shakuni; Karna and Aswatthama; Dronacharya and Kripacharya, the teachers who had initiated the Five Brothers and the Kauravas into the art and science of war.

Yudhishthira had decided to make the *Rajasuya* an occasion for bringing about harmony between the Five Brothers and Duryodhana and his brothers.

To show his confidence in the members of his family, he appointed them to key positions.

Yudhishthira begged of Bhishma as the head of the Kuru House, and his guru, Dronacharya, to oversee all the arrangements.

Aswatthama, the son of Dronacharya, was requested to receive the *Srotriyas* and look after them. King Duryodhana was requested to receive the presents from the guests, a position implying great confidence. Yudhishthira hoped that this would be reciprocated by their cousins.

He appointed Dushasana, the brother of king Duryodhana, and Sanjaya, the Minister of Hastinapura, to look after the royal guests.

Kripacharya, the revered teacher, was entrusted with the work of evaluating the gold and jewellery presented.

The Minister Vidura, wise and far-sighted, was appointed to look after the disbursements of the valuables.

Krishna took upon himself the sacred duty of washing the feet of the learned *Srotriyas.* He was the centre of attraction; if he happened to attend a discussion, he would even take part in it with learned ease.

Yudhishthira was mightily pleased that things were going on smoothly. But sometimes he was disappointed at the attitude of some of the Princes who did not appreciate the significance of the *Rajasuya.*

Of all of them, Sishupal was the most difficult to please. In spite of the years, he had never forgotten that Krishna, his cousin, had carried away his bride, Rukmini, and did not even acknowledge the greetings which Krishna offered him. He had been a close associate of Jarasandha's and out of overweening conceit, had never cared to assess the position which Krishna had attained to in the life of the Aryas. But now after Jarasandha was eliminated, he saw the hand of his enemy in everything happening here.

He was highly affronted at some of the guests, headed by Sahadeva of Magadha, treating Krishna like a divinity.

When the planets were propitious, Yudhishthira was ceremoniously initiated as the *yajaman,* sacrificer. Then he went into the Hall of Sacrifice accompanied by the Rajanyas, where hundreds of Brahmins had already started the ceremony.

On the first day at the end of the ceremony, Yudhishthira was crowned King of Indraprastha.

On the second day, all the *Srotriyas* and Rajanyas were gathered in the Hall of Sacrifice. The God of Fire was wor-

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shipped by appropriate chants and oblations.

Next was the important ceremony of offering *agrapuja* to a Muni or a King of the highest distinction constituting him the guardian of the sacrifice. The atmosphere was surcharged with tension.

Sishupal and his friends expected that the choice would fall upon him.

When it was announced that the auspicious moment had come, Bhishma turned to Yudhishthira. 'My son, the ancient canons prescribed that when the auspicious moment comes, the sacrificial sessions shall begin with your offering *agrapuja* to the Muni or *Rajanya* of the highest distinction.'

Yudhishthira's heart missed a beat. This would lead to terrible disaster, he sensed. Sishupal and his friends clearly had decided to play a prominent role in the *Rajasuya.* Left to himself, he would have liked to offer the *agrapuja* to Bhishma, the oldest and the most respected of Rajanyas. The fact that he had foresworn the throne of Hastinapura only added to his moral stature. Yudhishthira paused for a moment and said: 'I am ready to offer my greetings to whomsoever you suggest. But you are the most respected of Rajanyas. . . . .'

Before he could complete the sentence, Bhishma intervened with a laugh: 'I am your grandfather, the head of the house of the Bharatas, and I am glad you have left the matter to me'.

Bhishma needed no time to make a choice. Krishna alone deserved to be worshipped. Without his guidance, the Kurus would have been destroyed, the Five Brothers would have been nowhere. Without his assistance, they would not have been able to marry Draupadi, or forge the alliance with King Drupad; but for his eliminating Jarasandha, the Arya world would not have survived. He paused, moved his hand over his beard.

There was complete silence in the Hall of Sacrifice.

'The greatest among us in valour, learning and wisdom', said Bhishma, 'who recently saved *Dharma* from collapse is. . . .'

Everyone felt the fateful moment had come.

'. . . . . . . Krishna Vaasudeva. He should be offered the *agrapuja*'.

There were loud shouts of *'sadhu'*, *'sadhu'*, 'Victory to Vaasudeva', from the *Srotriyas* and most of the Rajanyas.

Sahadeva approached Krishna with offerings, washed his feet, placed the *kum-kum* mark on his forehead, performed the *aarti* by waving the light before him and offered him *agrapuja*. The decision of old Bhishma was welcomed by the *Srotriyas* led by the Master, who began to chant invoking the Gods for their blessing.

Drupad of Panchala, Sahadeva of Magadha and many Rajanyas enthusiastically shouted: 'Victory to Sri Krishna'.

When the enthusiastic shouts abated, the Master stepped forward to where Krishna was seated and placed his hands on Krishna's head. 'May the Gods help you to be the *Sasvat-dharma-gupta*, the saviour of eternal *dharma*'.

Following his lead, the *Srotriyas* chanted Vedic *mantras* for peace.

When the invocation for peace was finished, there was complete silence, which was shattered by king Sishupal.

'I will not be a party to this sinful affront', he shouted.

CHAPTER 10

THE CHAKRA

SISHUPAL was consumed by a terrific rage. His hands trembled; his eyes were bloodshot.

When Sishupal could control his excitement, he addressed the Grandfather in a defiant tone. 'Son of Shantanu, son of Ganga, in having the cowherd worshipped by *agrapuja,* you have been subservient to the Five Brothers. You have forsaken the righteous path for selfish ends'.

After a pause, he continued: 'Krishna is not a king. If you wanted to find a suitable Yadava, you could have selected his father, Vasudeva. If you wanted to find a king, old in years, king Drupad was here. If you wanted a hero who is a master both of Shastric lore and the art of war, Aswatthama was here. If you wanted to honour a venerable sage, Muni Dvaipaayana was here'.

He then turned to Krishna and said: 'Son of Vasudeva, you are greedy, ambitious and deceitful. The Five Brothers, out of cowardice, have paid you an undeserved honour. If you were an honourable man, Krishna, you would have refused this undeserved honour'.

Saying this, Sishupal left his throne and so did his friends.

Yudhishthira went up to Sishupal and in his most persuasive tone said: 'Valiant son of Damakhosh, is it fair to abuse the revered Bhishma, so noble and so valiant, who has been the living embodiment of *kshaatra-tej*?'

Bhishma, by a restraining gesture, stopped Yudhishthira from speaking further and intervened, thinking that Sishupal, if handled tactfully, would allow the *Rajasuya* to be performed without a break.

'Noble son of Damaghosh,' he said, 'let not your anger cloud your vision. Think for a moment. What we have done is proper. We will adore Vaasudeva. He has rescued Arya *dharma* from one crisis after another. However, if you believe that we have been unfair to you or to those who think in the same way as you do, you can go your way. Leave us to go ours'.

The Rajanyas felt that something terrible was happening. They left their seats and crowded round Bhishma, Krishna, the Five Brothers, Sishupal and Sunith.

Sahadeva, who never spoke without being spoken to, departed from his usual habit.

'King of Chedi,' he said, 'let those who are against the *agrapuja* offered by me stand aside or depart. Let us complete the *Rajasuya;* all the Srotriyas and Rajanyas except a few desire to do it'.

Sishupal turned to the Rajanyas who had gathered round him in support and said: 'Noble Rajanyas, we will break up this *Rajasuya;* nullify the coronation of Yudhishthira and disown the *agrapuja* of the cowherd.' His friends nodded assent.

Sishupal was so excited that words continued to come from his mouth in a torrent. Pointing to the revered Grandfather, he continued: 'You, son of Ganga—which receives men indiscriminately—your words are all false; so has your whole life been.'

With withering contempt, he continued: 'You claim that your Brahmacharya—celibacy is inviolate. This claim is made only to screen your importance. Today you will meet the desperate end you deserve'.

Krishna, who was standing near Yudhishthira, came and stood beside Bhishma. Sishupal turned to him and said:

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by murdering your uncle and patron, Kamsa'.

'You prompted this butcher,' he said, pointing to Bhima, 'to kill Jarasandha by a trick. Why are you here? You have no place among the Rajanyas'.

Bhima, trembling with rage, took a step towards Sishupal. Bhishma intervened. 'Don't, Bhima,' said Bhishma, 'we have offered *agrapuja* to the noble Vaasudeva. He is now the guardian of the *Rajasuya*. Leave it to him—the best among men—to deal with the situation, as he thinks proper'.

'Vaasudeva, the best of men! ha! ha! ha!' Sishupal exclaimed with a contemptuous laugh. 'You are a dotard, Bhishma, a bard singing the praises of your masters. If you must, you had better sing the praises of the noble Rajanyas present here—the respected King Drupad, Karna, the unrivalled archer, or Duryodhana, the most valiant of warriors'.

'Sishupal, you are angry. Anger, as you know, is the greatest enemy of man', said Bhishma. 'By offering *agrapuja* to the noble Vaasudeva, we sought no favour. I live on no man's favour. And.... I will not deviate from the righteous path at your behest, however powerful you may be'.

Sunith, who stood next to Sishupal, said: 'You are an old sinner. You deserve to be killed as the noble Sishupal said.'

'Young Rajanya, I would sooner die than live under your threats', said Bhishma, drawing himself to his full height. 'I speak the truth. I act according to the truth. And that is: Vaasudeva is the greatest amongst us all; great in valour; great in wisdom; great in learning; great in dedication to *dharma*'.

'I will deal with the cowherd when his turn comes,' said Sishupal. 'I will kill you first; then the Five Brothers who trapped us into accepting Krishna as the supreme authority amongst us'.

Carried away by anger, Sishupal drew his sword. His friends, with their hands on the hilts of their swords, grew defiant.

The Five Brothers and Krishna and Bhima carried no weapons as they were taking part in the ceremonies.

Unperturbed, Krishna moving Sahadeva aside, faced Sishupal. His tone was quiet as he spoke; 'Noble king of Chedi, I know that you have no quarrel with the venerable Bhishma or the Five Brothers; it is with me. You are my cousin, yet you have pursued us—the Yadavas—with venom. When we had gone to Pragjyotish, you set fire to Dwaraka. When my father performed *Aswamedha* (the horse sacrifice), you forcibly carried away the sacred horse'.

'Yes', Sishupal said laughing. 'I did all that. What about it?'

'I should have punished you for your misdeeds long ago. But I had promised your mother, the venerable Srutasravaa, that I would forgive you a hundred affronts, but no more. You have now crossed the limit'.

The people standing there were taken aback to see how Krishna was transformed. The voice, so indulgent at first, was now stern. The face, surrounded by a halo, was now set in majesty. The elegant man was transformed into a God—dominating the affairs of men.

'I will teach you a lesson today, cowherd', Sishupal said and flourished his sword. His friends also drew their swords, determined to kill Krishna.

Bhima took a step forward to protect Krishna, but, by a commanding gesture, he waved him away.

'Sishupal',—the voice was now charged with irresistible authority, 'today you have abused the hospitality of the Five Brothers. You have insulted the noble Bhishma, revered by all Aryas. You have converted the Hall of Sacrifice into a Hall of Wickedness'.

Everybody's eyes were pinned on Krishna, who continued: 'Sishupal, once I had to rescue Rukmini, the noble

Princess of Vidarbha from you. Today I propose to rescue *dharma* from you'.

Sishupal forced a laugh. 'Shameless cowherd, are you not ashamed to gloat over your running away with the Princess solemnly pledged to me?'

Sishupal took a step forward with his sword raised.

Those who loved Krishna were terrified. He was unarmed.

Bhima took the naked sword from Sahadeva.

Suddenly there was a whizzing sound which arrested the attention of everyone. Every eye was directed towards a strange discus with a razor-sharp edge, flashing in the sunshine, whirling and flying towards them through mid-air.

It hovered over the head of Krishna; he caught the formidable weapon by a sweeping gesture of his right hand.

Before anyone could realise what was happening, Krishna sent it whirling at Sishupal.

Sishupal opened his eyes wide in fright and dropped his sword, which clattered to the ground.

The *chakra* came whirling, severed the head from Sishupal's body and returned to Krishna's hand.

Sishupal's head fell to the ground, the headless body tottered to a fall.

CHAPTER 11

THE PREDICTION

THE friends of Sishupal led by Dantavaktra and Sunith, dazed by the awesome power of Krishna, left Indraprastha.

Krishna took charge of the situation as one of the nearest relatives of Sishupal and embraced his young son stricken by grief.

The body of Sishupal was cremated with due ceremony. The close relatives of the dead King withdrew from the *Rajasuya* during the prescribed days of mourning. Thereafter, the son of Sishupal, with the blessing of the Master, was crowned King of Chedi by Yudhishthira before the assembled Rajanyas.

Yudhishthira's generosity, sense of fairness, and kindliness of approach to everyone created a deep impression on all those who attended the *Rajasuya*.

Though the *Rajasuya* resumed its course, the glamour of the sacrificial session was gone; unhappiness lay in the hearts of all.

What saved the situation was the moral influence of the Master. Crowds continued to come to have his *darshan;* the ailing came and prayed for his healing touch; the children waited for him to serve the food and the Rajanyas wanted his blessing.

Under his influence, the *Srotriyas* developed a new sense of mission by recapturing the high tradition of *tapas* which he followed scrupulously as well as a deeper faith in the *WORD* as divinity.

The Master impressed upon them again and again that *dharma* would prevail only if they transposed it into their lives; that they would be respected only so long as they followed a life of *tapas,* rigorous self-discipline and invoked the sacred mantra of *Gayatri.*

When the *Rajasuya* was concluded, the sacred fire was ceremonially extinguished.

The Rajanyas, who had not left with Dantavaktra, saluted Yudhishthira, as a Chakravarti, who, in turn, presented the guests with valuable presents and asked his brothers to accompany them to the frontier.

Vasudeva and Balarama, with the Yadava *maharathis,* departed for their homes. Krishna, Uddhava and Satyaki stayed behind for a few days.

Grandfather Bhishma and other guests from Hastinapura also stayed behind to see the strange and miraculous Sabha which Maya, the Asura, had built for Yudhishthira.

Duryodhana wore his best smile when he bade good-bye to Yudhishthira.

Yudhishthira was happy in the thought that his Kaurava cousins would now be friendly.

While on a visit to the Sabha in company with Bhima and Draupadi, Duryodhana was drenched by walking into a pool, the floor of which he took for even ground. He also hit a wall in which an illusion had been created of a doorway. Bhima and Draupadi laughed uproariously and Duryodhana was deeply mortified.

Ghatotkacha's departure for his homeland was a great event. He was always cheerful; his comments on men and things were gay. He had become a special favourite of the royal family. Even a section of the citizens of Indraprastha had come to like him.

There were endless difficulties about the manner in which he would return to Rakshasa-land. Boatmen would not take a Rakshasa as a passenger and there were 12 of them

—Ghatotkacha and his companions.

'Why do I want a boat? We don't travel by water. It is inauspicious', said Ghatotkacha. He was firm. 'We will go only through the forest, but I will kidnap "that uncle," ' he said, pointing to Sahadeva. With a mischievous smile he added: 'Then you must all come to take him back'. Ghatotkacha having spent some months in Sahadeva's company during his *digvijaya* campaign in the South, had appropriated "that uncle" as a special property of his.

Ultimately, it was decided that Sahadeva, with a few archers, should accompany Ghatotkacha and his companions till they reached the forest. Ghatotkacha would then be in his territory.

While taking leave of his father, his eyes twinkled merrily. Softly moving his hand over his father's back as if he was a baby, a liberty which no other member of the family except Mother Kunti would have dared to take, he said: 'Father, I like you very much. I wish you were coming back with me. Mother thought that now you would be delighted to come back'.

'My boy, how can I come?', asked Bhima. 'There are so many people here to be looked after.'

'I know', admitted Ghatotkacha. 'You would like to come with me, but these uncles can't do without you, so you have to live with them. But I am going to complain to mother that you didn't allow me to kill your enemies.'

Bhima laughed, playfully patting his back. He liked his son. 'Tell your mother that you obeyed me and she will be happy'.

Ghatotkacha's mind was fixed on the help which he could have rendered his father in killing his enemies. He said: 'What a waste of time it was and what a noise you made when that enemy of yours was going to kill you. If you had let me do it, I would have done it neatly—jumped upon him, thrown him on the ground, strangled him and torn his heart out with my nails like this'. He made an expressive gesture.

When Bhima translated his remarks, the people standing there laughed; the youngsters danced for joy.

'If you had let me do it, mother would have been very happy', said Ghatotkacha.

When parting, the young Rakshasa placed Bhima's foot on his head. He turned to go and then turned to Bhima and pulled him away a few steps.

'Father', he whispered, 'remember this; next time when you want to kill your enemies, call me'.

'I will do so', said Bhima. The son responded with a smile.

The next day, Yudhishthira felt as if rudely awakened from a dream world to face the world as it was—a world without heroes and sages, which revolved round the personal ambitions of battle-hungry Rajanyas.

Suddenly the harsh truth came to him that he had been trapped in the *kshaatra-tej* tradition. He had not wanted the *Rajasuya,* but he was forced to perform it because of the imponderable influence of the *kshaatra* tradition and the ambition of acquiring a *Chakravarti* in the family.

Even Krishna, wise and valorous and so foreseeing, made no secret of his view—wherever *adharma* becomes rampant, it must be destroyed.

For a long time, Yudhishthira could not sleep that night. Everything was done in his name, often with his approval. How could he disown responsibility?

Every ceremony ended by an invocation to *shanti,* peace. The refrain invoking *shanti, shanti, shanti*—peace, peace, peace—was chanted again and again, and yet in order that peace might prevail, Jarasandha and Sishupal had to be killed. The *Rajasuya* performed to bring peace and harmony had ended only in intensified hatred between the two groups of Rajanyas now pledged to destroy one another.

When he was half-asleep, he felt as if he was lying wounded on a battlefield expecting someone to come and run his sword through him. At the same time, he heard the distant refrain of the invocation to peace, *shanti, shanti, shanti*—peace, peace, peace.

Had he nothing better to do, nothing more useful, nothing more to achieve than prepare for butchery on a mass scale? The question arose insistently in his mind.

* * *

The Eldest washed the feet of the Master when he came to Yudhishthira to bid good-bye. As he did so, tears were in his eyes. He was very unhappy.

'May I ask you, Master, to help me by telling me what you see in the future? You know the past, the present and the future.'

'By all means unburden yourself, my son,' said the Master affectionately.

'Sishupal's death, I feel, was ominous', said Yudhishthira. 'Will there be a war in the future?'

The Master appeared to be peering into the future.

'My son,' he said in a low voice, 'Sishupal's death was not the end, but the beginning of a convulsion involving the massacre of *kshatriyas*. The ghosts of Kamsa, Jarasandha and Sishupal will stalk the earth and will continue to do so till their blood lust is satisfied'.

'How can I avoid this disaster, Master? I am ready to do anything to avoid it', said Yudhishthira.

The Master's eyes were fixed on the future. Then he said in a low voice: 'Yudhishthira, my son, you will become the centre of this convulsion'.

'Oh, great God!' Yudhishthira exclaimed, and asked in a voice choked with tears: 'Is there no way to escape this tragedy, Master?'

'You can't.' The Master's voice was sad but firm.

'Even if I surrender myself absolutely, woo death or take *sanyastha* and give up the world?' asked Yudhishthira. The Master was silent.

Yudhishthira asked: 'How long will the convulsion last?'

The Master closed his eyes, opened them again and said: 'For thirteen years'.

Yudhishthira shuddered. He repeated the question: 'Can you not show me the way to escape this calamity?'

The master shook his head. 'I am afraid you can't. At the appropriate time, the Lord Shiva, the Great Destroyer, will advise you'.

The Master rose. Yudhishthira fell at his feet, smothering the cry of anguish which rose in his throat.

* * *

Two days later when the morning star rose, the silence of the dawn was shattered by the sound of fast-rushing chariots coming to a halt near the royal mansion. He heard Nakula and Sahadeva talking to the people who had arrived.

Nakula ran up to Yudhishthira. 'Eldest, the noble Vasudeva, when on his way back to Dwaraka, has been captured by Shalva, perhaps put to death. The chariot-warriors report that he has also invaded Saurashtra and set fire to several villages'.

'Let us go to Vaasudeva', Yudhishthira said.

'Sahadeva has already gone to inform him', said Nakula.

As he reached the mansion where Krishna was staying, he heard him ordering his charioteer, Daruka, to get ready.

Yudhishthira almost ran to Krishna. 'What is the matter, brother?', he asked.

'My venerable father has been taken captive by Shalva, who has been burning villages in Saurashtra. I must leave immediately'.

The other Brothers who had come there too offered to accompany Krishna.

Krishna said: 'No, please don't try to help me. I will deal with the situation in my own way'.

Conches were blown to announce that the chariots were ready.

When parting, Yudhishthira embraced Krishna with tears in his eyes. 'Brother, if I am a *Chakravarti* today, it is solely due to you. I don't know how to thank you'.

'Don't thank me. You take your own way to strengthen Indraprastha. But remember', Krishna lowered his voice and added: 'Duryodhana will never forgive you for being so prosperous. Don't be trapped by him'.

Krishna took the reins of the chariot himself; he was in a hurry and the horses obeyed the master. The rest of the Yadava *maharathis* followed him in their chariots, which disappeared in clouds of dust.

CHAPTER 12

UNCLE VIDURA BRINGS A MESSAGE

YUDHISHTHIRA felt depressed. He felt as if the shadow of the coming war was over the Kurus.

'Oh, Gods', he confessed to himself. 'How can I arrive at peace? The sages pray for peace, but there is no peace. In reality, as Bhima says, peace is only a pause between one war and another'.

Before his mind rose one picture after another; of the ruthless destroyer, Kartaveerya, reducing Aryavarta to a charnel house; of Parasurama, the Mighty, destroying the invaders in a series of brilliant battles in search of peace; of his own ancestor, Shantanu, winning the final round of battles, shedding rivers of blood to acquire imperial status; of Jarasandha who indulged in murderous wars against the Rajanyas in order to establish his hegemony and reduced Mathura to ashes, and took a large number of Rajanyas captive in order to offer them to the Fire God.

Everyone had thought that once Jarasandha was killed, there would be peace. However, Sishupal, filled wih hatred, had wanted another war and had had to be killed.

Now Shalva, a friend to Jarasandha, had invaded Saurashtra and kidnapped the noble Vasudeva. The Yadavas led by Krishna were sure to inflict a crushing defeat on Shalva; they could not live in peace unless Shalva was destroyed—and they were right.

He heaved a deep sigh. 'My brothers believe that they will not be able to attain peace till Duryodhana is vanquished in war. The Master has predicted a great war, in which I am going to be the central figure'.

'Poor Duryodhana', Yudhishthira again and again said to himself. 'By an accident, he was born after I was—that too to a blind father. He was thus deprived of his heritage through no fault of his own. Now he wants to deprive us of our heritage which he thinks belongs to him. Bhima, the bravest of the brave, thinks that if we want peace, we must be prepared for war.'

Yudhishthira thought and thought, but every thought ended in self-commiseration.

In bitterness, he confessed to himself again and again. 'I haven't the strength to stand for peace or for war. I am, naturally, as the Master says, going to be the pivot round which the wars will be fought. What is the way out of it?'

'How can I quiet the volcano of hate which rages in Duryodhana's heart? How can I induce him to think in terms of peace, so long as he believes that the heritage is denied to him?'

'My brothers give me the respect and affection due to a father. They give me unstinted loyalty. However, they will never agree to give up Indraprastha'.

He thought and thought.... 'My brothers believe that Duryodhana wants to deny them their legitimate heritage—and rightly too....Indraprastha is not a heritage. It is what we have created by our own exertions. How can I ask them to give it up?'

'If I suggested to my brothers that they should give up Indraprastha, even Mother Kunti and Draupadi would disown me. They would not part with Indraprastha to the Kauravas.'.

'How can I make them see the stark reality of the coming war? The *WORD* announces that peace is everything, but where is it?'

'This habit of war in the hearts of men—it invests horses, chariots, the bow and the arrow, the battle-axe and the mace—necessary to win a war—with divine attributes. How can we abandon its practice?'

He chanted the invocation to Peace in a low voice:

'The heaven is at peace; so is the sky;
May that peace be mine.
The earth is at peace; the waters and the grasses are at
peace;
May that peace be mine.
The WORD is peace; all the Gods are peace;
May that peace be mine.
May that peace be mine; and with that peace
I will give peace to men and beasts.
May that peace be mine.
Peace, peace, peace'. (*shanti, shanti, shanti*).

'It is all a mockery', Yudhishthira thought. 'How can peace be mine? I cannot get peace unless the hate in the hearts of Duryodhana and my brothers is conquered. How can I falsify the Master's prophecy. Oh Gods! Is there no way out?'

In his mind there was a flash as of lightning. 'The root cause of the war is the heritage. If I want to falsify the prophecy, I must get rid of it'.

* * *

It was the year when Draupadi was living with the Eldest.

She observed that her husband was often restless, lost in thought or absent-minded. Evidently, the failure of the *Rajasuya* to bring peace weighed heavily on him. The alignment of the Rajanyas for and against the Five Brothers also, she sensed, had left a bleeding wound in his heart.

All the other members of the family were jubilant over the way Sishupal had been dealt with by Krishna. The insults which the prince of Chedi had hurled at the venerable Grandfather had deserved this fate. But she saw that Yudhishthira avoided talking about it. He was thinking of how to falsify the Master's prophecy.

Unexpectedly, two *rathis* came to announce the arrival of uncle Vidura, the principal Minister at Hastinapura.

Uncle Vidura had a privileged position in Hastinapura. Like Dhritarashtra and Pandu, he was begotten by the Master but on the palace maid who substituted one of the Kashi princesses when *Niyoga* was performed. He was brought up with Dhritarashtra and a close bond of affection had sprung up between the blind prince and his step brother.

From his mother, Vidura had inherited a homely face, a blunt nose and a squat figure. From his father, he had inherited good nature and moral integrity. Since boyhood, Vidura had been wise and considerate, devoted to dharma and solicitous of the welfare of the Kuru family.

As he grew up, he became an adept in statecraft and an authority in *Nitishashtra,* the science of human behaviour and he was accepted as the principal Minister of Hastinapura.

With his uncanny gift of seeing another man's point of view, he earned the respect and confidence of everyone in the royal family other than Duryodhana and his brothers.

He had supported Grandfather Bhishma when Pandu's sons had been accepted into the family. By their likeable ways and inherent goodness, the Five Brothers had won his affection; in return they looked upon him as a father.

Vidura tried his best to make friends with Duryodhana and his brothers but they rejected his advances. They looked upon him with contempt; after all, he was the son of a palace maid. They considered that his influence over their father was responsible for his partiality for the Five Brothers. Shakuni, the brain behind Duryodhana's coterie, had found in him a formidable enemy. He could see through their manoeuvres, and his influence over the Grandfather and the venerable Mother was immense. He was a life-long friend to Dhritarashtra and also bore a certain influence over him, but Dhritarashtra was easily swayed by his love for his son, Duryodhana, who played upon his weakness.

Uncle Vidura's unexpected return to Indraprastha forebode a coming calamity.

The Five Brothers gave him an affectionate welcome. Vidura embraced the Five Brothers, prostrated himself before Mother Kunti and had a cheerful smile for the other members of the family.

After he had partaken of a meal, when the Five Brothers, Mother Kunti and Draupadi met Vidura, his smile had disappeared and his eyes were heavy with anxiety.

'Uncle, what gives us the pleasure of your company?', asked Yudhishthira of Vidura.

'To deliver a message which I am sorry to bring', said Vidura. He looked sadly at the loving family which was soon going to be overwhelmed by calamity.

'What is it? Let us have it', said Bhima, who was prepared to face any calamity.

'The noble King, your uncle, invites you to Hastinapura'.

Everyone was surprised. Bhima opened his eyes wide and asked: 'Why?'

Vidura heaved a sigh. 'It is difficult for me to put it into words', he said with feeling.

'Tell us the reason, Uncle', asked Bhima. 'We are sufficiently seasoned. This is not the first time an inauspicious move comes from Hastinapura'.

'In imitation of Maya's Sabha built for you, Duryodhana has had a similar Sabha constructed at Jayant and he wants you to visit it'.

'Duryodhana does not send uncle Vidura to give us an invitation to see the Sabha. There is something more', Bhima impatiently remarked.

Uncle Vidura said: 'Duryodhana invites you to the Royal game of dice—in effect, sends you a challenge to play it'.

'The Royal game of dice!' exclaimed Yudhishthira.

Bhima's face was flushed; Arjuna frowned; Draupadi's eyes flashed in anger.

'The Eldest is not an adept at the game and we play it indifferently. It is unfair to challenge us', said Arjuna.

'We refuse to go to Hastinapura to play the game. It is Shakuni, the cheat, who has discovered this way of winning our wealth', said Bhima.

'Yudhishthira, my son, what have you to say?' asked uncle Vidura.

CHAPTER 13

A CHALLENGE TO THE MASTER'S PREDICTION

YUDHISHTHIRA was lost in thought. 'The Master's prediction is coming true', he said to himself.

Everyone expected him to speak. He asked: 'Uncle, what is the purpose of this invitation? They were with us for months when the *Rajasuya* was performed. Why are we invited now?'

Uncle Vidura shook his head in despair. Bhima said: 'It is a device to filch Indraprastha from us'.

'Or', Sahadeva interrupted, 'to get us to decline the invitation to the royal game of dice and expose us to the ridicule of the Rajanyas'.

'There must be some motive behind this move. What is it, uncle Vidura?' asked Draupadi.

'It is a sorry tale', uncle Vidura said. 'The Eldest placed him in charge of the royal presents at the *Rajasuya* and he was amazed at your riches. He wants to rob you of them'.

'Seeing our prosperity, he became blind like his father', Draupadi said cuttingly.

'On his return to Hastinapura, he raised a storm, gave up food, and threatened to court death unless your riches became his', said uncle Vidura. 'We tried our best to cure him of his malady but failed. He was like one gone mad. I remonstrated with him. I said to him: "You have been given Hastinapura as you desired. What more do you want?" As usual he abused me for being your partisan. His reply was: "The Five Brothers are not entitled to the riches which they have gathered at Indraprastha. They are all mine—my patrimony. Have not the old canons laid down that the wealth acquired by younger members of the family belongs to the head of the family—the father?" '

'Did I not tell you, brother', said Bhima to Yudhishthira, 'that Duryodhana would not allow us to live in peace in Indraprastha?'

Turning to uncle Vidura, Mother Kunti asked: 'What is the view of the venerable Grandfather?'

'The Grandfather refused to listen to Duryodhana's unreasonable demands and so did the king at first. But the king, as you know, is very weak and in spite of my advice could not bear to see his son unhappy. He began by calling Duryodhana petulant and ended by accepting the means devised by the wicked Shakuni.'

'Those must be something really wicked', said Bhima.

'Yes, it was Shakuni who suggested to him that you should be invited to the royal game; he can then play on Duryodhana's behalf'. He added: 'He was sure that you would not have the courage to reject the noble king's invitation. And with the cheating Shakuni playing against you, you are sure to lose the game'.

'Why need we accept the invitation?' asked Draupadi.

'If you decline the invitation, Duryodhana will denounce the Eldest as a coward and a disgrace to the *kshaatra* tradition. He will put you to shame and call in question your right to hold the *Rajasuya*'.

'I don't care what Duryodhana calls us', said Bhima and added emphatically, 'I refuse to accept the invitation, whatever the consequences. Our reputation is firmly based on our heroic exploits'.

'Don't be in a hurry, Bhima,' said uncle Vidura. 'Duryodhana will not rest content with calling the Eldest a coward. He will summon his friends and your enemies, Dantavaktra and others, to help him to capture Indraprastha.'

'He wants to force us to go to war. We are ready to do so', said Bhima.

'It is not so easy, my son', said Vidura. 'Your friends have recently returned home and would find it difficult to come back so soon to your help. Krishna's hands are full with the war with Shalva and the Yadavas are fighting for their lives. This would be the right opportunity for Duryodhana to overwhelm you'.

'He never will, Uncle,' said Bhima.

'But you know the value the Rajanyas attach to the royal game of dice. They do not call it gambling—which it really is. If you don't accept the challenge, it will undermine your status as a Rajanya', said uncle Vidura. 'And other Rajanyas would hold you guilty of provoking a meaningless war—a war which would have been avoided by playing the game of dice'.

Everybody was silent, overweighed with their thoughts.

'We must not come to a decision in haste', said the Eldest. 'Let us think over the matter for two days'.

'By all means take your time, Yudhishthira', said uncle Vidura.

'What is there to be thought about? It is an invitation to cut our throats', said Bhima vehemently. 'We refuse to accept the invitation'.

The whole night Yudhishthira's mind was enveloped in darkness. He was struggling to bring peace, but there was no possibility of it now.

'The Master's prophecy is coming true', he said to himself. 'Uncle Vidura is right. Shakuni has timed the challenge at the most propitious moment for him. Krishna is busy fighting Shalva. The friends who had gathered at the *Rajasuya* will not be willing to come back to help so soon'.

He thought and thought. He wanted peace, but war was at his doorstep.

The picture which he had been seeing in his dreams was before his eyes—a battle-field, full of the broken wheels of chariots and the limbs of warriors scattered on the ground; himself lying with an arrow in his chest, waiting for someone to come and put a sword through him. He shuddered.

He saw mothers, sisters, widows, children, heart-broken, wandering homeless and cows butchered in hundreds.

He heard the echoes of the refrain *shanti, shanti, shanti* —peace, peace, peace, from all sides, but it was all a mockery.

When he woke up, a thought came to him.

'The Master is right. I alone am the architect of these misfortunes. I am responsible to the Gods. I have not the courage to face the situation boldly'.

'I want to keep my heritage; at any rate, I could not deprive my brothers of their heritage. I do not know what to do. I must find the way out myself.'

He saw the glimpse of a solution. He summoned all the courage in him to live up to righteousness. The war should be stopped, whatever it might cost him.

He knew what his brothers, mother and Draupadi would like him to do: to refuse to accept Duryodhana's challenge. They were right in thinking that this was a trick to deprive them of Indraprastha. But peace was in balance. Whether he or Duryodhana ruled over Indraprastha made no difference, *dharma* must be upheld.

Suddenly the decision stood before him, like a flaming sword. He grasped its hilt and decided to eliminate the possibilities of war, and challenge the Master's prophecy.

On the third day when they met to find a way out of this difficulty, Yudhishthira had made up his mind.

'Well, what do you think, Eldest?', asked uncle Vidura.

'What do you advise, uncle?', said Yudhishthira.

'My advice to you is: Don't go to Hastinapura just now. Tide over this inauspicious moment. You can truthfully say that you may have to go to the rescue of Vaasudeva and cannot come just now. What do you say to that?'

Bhima said: 'I would not give a false excuse. I would lead our *maharathis* to the help of Krishna.'

'It is not so easy to decide whether we should accept the challenge or not, my brother', said Yudhishthira, in a tone full of affection. 'My brothers, all of you have pledged yourselves to honour my word and obey my directions. Unless the pledge is revoked, we cannot consider this problem honestly. I, therefore, release you from the pledge. Bhima, you are the fittest to govern Indraprastha; take over its kingship. I do not feel myself adequate to be a king. I will retire to a forest'.

Everyone was shocked. Kunti gasped. 'What are you saying, Eldest?' she said, in a piteous voice, with tears in her eyes. 'I nursed all of you, brought you up in the hope that you would stand together in life. Draupadi agreed to marry you all in order that you might be kept together. If you are divided, everything I did will be in vain. The dream of your establishing a *dharma-raj,* rule of righteousness, will have been shattered.'

'I know, I know all that', said Yudhishthira, in a voice full of anguish, yet firm. 'The crisis has come. The Master predicted that there would be a war in which the *kshatriyas* would be massacred and I would be the centre of it'. Yudhishthira wiped his tears from his eyes and continued: 'It pains me to break your hearts, but I have thought it over carefully and I must challenge the Master's prediction, with you if I can or without you if I must. I must gather whatever spiritual strength the God of Righteousness has given me'.

'When did the Master make his prediction?' asked Bhima.

'The day he came to bid good-bye', said Yudhishthira. His hands were trembling as his emotion intensified. Turning to uncle Vidura he said: 'The invitation that you have brought now is the first step towards the fulfilment of the Master's prediction'.

There was a shadow of distress in his face and all except Bhima were deeply moved by what the Eldest said.

Bhima said in disgust: 'We have pledged you complete loyalty. We will accept your decision to cut our throats. What more do you want?'

'I don't want to trade on your loyalty. The crisis has arisen not only between ourselves and Duryodhana but between us also. I can't ask you to forsake *kshaatra dharma*'.

'Don't take a dark view of the future', Arjuna said. 'Things may change for the better. Let us stand together. Very often we are unhappy at your decisions but we have so far accepted them'.

Uncle Vidura, with uncanny perception saw what was at the bottom of Yudhishthira's resolve. The Eldest looked as if he was offering himself as an oblation to the sacred fire.

Uncle Vidura said: 'It is a noble resolve, Yudhishthira'. Turning to Bhima he said: 'The Eldest wants to be true to his *dharma* and seeks peace. Will you, if you have to accept his decision against your inclination, obey him at any cost?'

Yudhishthira said: 'I have loved you brothers more than myself. The whole of our power is built on the unity of the five of us and the inspiration of the mother and the Princess of Panchala. But I see dangers ahead whatever way we decide'.

'We will adhere to your decision whatever happens', said Arjuna.

Mother Kunti said: 'You have taken a pledge to be together for your life. Your strength is anchored on this unity. That is the basis on which Draupadi agreed to marry all five of you'.

Draupadi spoke. 'I see inauspicious moments ahead of us. I had vowed that I would keep you all together; if I cannot, I will have lived in vain. I will go back to Kampilya'.

Bhima controlling his anger said: 'You are obliging us to make a very difficult choice, Eldest. The Master knows the past, present and future. If he has predicted a war, it will come whatever your efforts to avoid it. We should therefore be prepared to face it'.

'Are you prepared to stand by Yudhishthira?', asked uncle Vidura.

'Our choice was made up', said Bhima, 'when mother brought us to Hastinapura and made us take a pledge that we would obey the Eldest in all matters. We shall stand by our word—even if you ask for our heads—Eldest, which in fact you are doing'.

Nakula nodded assent.

Yudhishthira turning to Sahadeva said: 'What have you to say about it, Sahadeva, the wise?'

Sahadeva scratched his head and said: 'If we break our promise, we will have betrayed *dharma,* and lost our moral strength'.

'Eldest, you should not discuss the matter any further', interrupted uncle Vidura. 'They have all stood by you in complete loyalty to you and will do so. They leave the matter entirely in your hands'.

Draupadi said: 'I am appalled. I wish Krishna were here to guide us. Things are very bad, but King Vrikodara, I am sure, will not fail to honour his promise to the Eldest'.

Tears were in Yudhishthira's eyes. He looked at his brothers, mother and wife, offering mute thanks for their loyalty.

'I have taken a frightful vow to challenge the Master's prediction, uncle Vidura. I do not know what is in store for me. But I can only act as *dharma* dictates. It must not be said that Pandu's sons failed *kshaatra-dharma;* at the same time I will not be untrue to the *dharma* which I have vowed to uphold'.

'What is your decision?' said Bhima in irritation. 'Tell us when you propose to cut our throats'.

'I am overwhelmed by the love that you bear me. We brothers, Mother Kunti and the noble Princess of Panchala are bound as one by infinite love'.

Then, looking down, he said in a trembling voice: 'Uncle Vidura, convey this message to uncle Dhritarashtra: We shall obey his wishes. We will come to Hastinapura and obey his commands'.

Draupadi, with wrathful eyes filled with tears, said: 'You have sold us to Duryodhana'.

CHAPTER 14

DRAUPADI PROTESTS

THE day before they were to start for Hastinapura, Draupadi came to Yudhishthira when he was alone. She was angry. Her eyes were aflame.

She sat down in front of him. Yudhishthira was in distress to see that she was passing through a maze of anxieties.

'Princess of Panchala, why are you so angry?' he asked.

'That is not the word. I am furious. I know what you are up to. You want to avoid war at any cost. That means you are going to play the royal game with Duryodhana and lose it', said Draupadi, and continued: 'You have bound us by our taking a pledge to obey you. You are the Eldest, the head of the family. Our bodies and souls are pledged to you. But haven't you any consideration for us, for your children, for the people who came to Indraprastha as if to a new heaven? What do you propose to do about them?'

'I am accepting the mandate of the revered Uncle. I can't disobey it', Yudhishthira replied.

'Tell me why you accepted to go to Hastinapura?' asked Draupadi.

'Princess of Panchala, you know how I love my brothers, how I respect my mother and how I cherish you. I do not know what I will do myself. But I will do as *dharma* dictates. You don't want me to betray my *dharma*?'

Draupadi broke down; tears were coursing down her cheeks.

'Don't feel distressed, Princess of Panchala. Have confidence in me', said Yudhishthira.

'Have confidence in you! Haven't you any consideration for your brothers who, in spite of what they felt, pledged their word not to defy you? Haven't you any consideration for your mother, for me? Haven't you any consideration for your son?' Draupadi paused a while and then continued: 'You know the venom of Duryodhana; you know the deceitful Shakuni; you know the motive behind our being invited to Hastinapura, and still you want to rush to your doom, carrying us with you.'

'Why do you trouble yourself?' asked Yudhishthira. 'Mother is going there. All the brothers are going. You are also going. Acharya Dhaumya is going too'.

Draupadi got up. 'I wish Krishna were here. At least he would stop you from committing suicide. Remember what he said when he left: "Don't fall into Duryodhana's trap". He was wise. He would have restrained you from walking into the snare'.

Yudhishthira was miserable. He knew that all he loved were in distress at the certain prospect of his sacrificing the welfare of the family, Indraprastha and *dharma* itself.

Draupadi, suppressing her sobs, said: 'All right, all right, do what you like. We have handed over our lives and the future of our son to you. Exercise your authority as the Eldest of the family and destroy us'.

Yudhishthira loved and admired this wonderful princess of Panchala, who was so proud and so wise. She understood the significance of what he was doing and felt the utter helplessness of the situation. *Dharma* was dragging him to Hastinapura to offer whatever Duryodhana wanted, to win peace, *shanti*.

Yudhishthira was torn by his inner conflict.

He did not want to play the royal game of dice with the deceitful Shakuni, but, as things were, he would have to do it.

He could refuse to go to Hastinapura and take the risk of a war as his brothers wanted him to do.

His brothers, mother and Draupadi were in distress at his attitude.

The next day, the royal procession, blessed by the brahmins, started from Indraprastha.

The people did not know the inner springs which moved Yudhishthira. They thought that it was a friendly visit to cement the bond between the Five Brothers and Duryodhana.

On their arrival at Hastinapura, the Five Brothers paid their respects to the Elders—Grandfather Bhishma, Uncle Dhritarashtra and his spouse, Gandhari, Drona and the other elders of the family.

Under pressure from the Eldest, the other Brothers, even Bhima, paid a visit to Duryodhana and Karna, who treated them with effusive cordiality.

Yudhishthira saw the preparations made for them. He could see that it was all intended to create the impression that everything was above board.

Yudhishthira could also see that his brothers felt like wild beasts in chains and were chafing at his decision, whatever it was.

Yudhishthira's mind was fixed on one thing, to give away Indraprastha, if war had to be avoided. Once they were rid of Indraprastha, they were free to go to a forest and live in *dharma*.

CHAPTER 15

DURYODHANA MAKES A REQUEST

FOUR oil lamps threw a flickering light across the room in which Grandfather Bhishma, tall and gaunt, lay in his bed, a *mull* shampooing his legs.

He had been a pillar of strength to the Kuru power in Aryavarta for decades. Now he was feeling that he could no longer play that role. He was anxiously reviewing the events which had gripped Hastinapura.

Duryodhana, the eldest son of the blind king, Dhritarashtra, had by the threat of committing suicide induced his father to invite the Five Brothers to the royal game of dice. It was, in fact, a challenge and no *kshatriya* pledged to *kshaatra dharma* could refuse to accept it. It was a matter of honour; if not accepted, it would be a legitimate ground for declaring war.

Bhishma had tried through Minister Vidura to dissuade King Dhritarashtra from sending the challenge to Yudhishthira, but the weak king, with tears in his eyes, had begged of Grandfather Bhishma not to over-rule the challenge; if he did—he was afraid—Duryodhana would commit suicide.

The wise Minister, Vidura, was selected by Dhritarashtra to carry the challenge to Indraprastha.

The Grandfather knew very well why Vidura was entrusted with this delicate task. He enjoyed the confidence of the Five Brothers and an invitation given by him would assure them that there was no sinister motive behind it. Vidura had accepted the mission in the hope that his intermediation might help tide over the crisis.

Grandfather Bhishma knew very well what the outcome of the challenge would be. The Five Brothers pledged to *kshaatra dharma* would accept. They would come to Hastinapura to play the game. Yudhishthira would have no chance against Shakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle, a magician at the game, who would play on behalf of Duryodhana.

If the Five Brothers declined to play the game, they would be dubbed cowards who had betrayed the *kshaatra* tradition. If, in the course of the play, they charged Shakuni with fraud, the game might be abandoned, but the Rajanyas, who were supporters of Duryodhana, would not hesitate to slay them.

Grandfather knew all Duryodhana's tricks. Two days ago he had given a splendid reception to the Five Brothers when they had arrived at Hastinapura. This was done to allay the people's fears that Duryodhana was playing a sinister game.

The Grandfather was at a loss to know what to do. He should intervene and stop the game. But Duryodhana's coterie—Dushasana, Karna, the son of Radheya, and Aswatthama, with Shakuni's brain behind them—had decided to flout even his authority. For the first time in his life, the members of the Kuru House would defy him; he did not know what to do about it.

Sanjaya, the Minister, came into the room leading the blind king, Dhritarashtra, to a seat near the bed on which the Grandfather was lying. By a gesture, he dismissed the *mull* attendant.

'My homage, venerable Grandfather,' said the king.

'My blessing, son,' replied the Grandfather and patted the king's back to show that his arm was extended in blessing. 'What brings you here at this time of the night, son?' he asked of the king.

In a weak, hesitant voice, Dhritarashtra said: 'Duryodhana has asked me to convey his humble request to you…'

'What is his request?' asked Bhishma. His tone was severe.

'…that it may please the venerable Grandfather not to intervene while the game is being played.'

The Grandfather looked with pity at Dhritarashtra, whose slabbering speech, trembling lower lip and shaking hands, made him a tragic figure of helplessness.

The Grandfather sat up in his bed and asked: 'What have the friends of Duryodhana decided to do if I refuse the request? Why not tell me all you know about the decision they have taken?'

'I am not quite sure what they will do,' the king replied. 'But report has it that they have planned some action.' He could not continue and turned his blind eyes on Sanjaya. 'Sanjaya, tell the venerable Grandfather what you know about the decision.'

'Forgive me, venerable lord, for telling the truth, now that I am asked to do so,' said Sanjaya, in an apologetic manner.

'Go on. Tell the truth,' said the Grandfather curtly and added: 'It won't be difficult for me to find out whether you are lying or not.'

'They have decided to go to any length to destroy the Five Brothers,' said Sanjaya with folded hands.

'Why evade my question?' said the Grandfather in a severe tone. 'What was the decision about my intervention?'

Sanjaya folding his hands said: 'The noble lord will tell you. I can't.'

The Grandfather knit his brows. 'It doesn't matter who tells me. What have they decided?'

'The boys were excited and talked nonsense,' said Dhritarashtra. His hands shook in excitement; his speech came haltingly.

He continued: 'Carried away by a passing frenzy, they have decided to defy your authority if you intervene. This foolish decision was made in excitement.' He could not say any more.

'You need not tell me anything further. I will complete the story if you like,' said the Grandfather with a sneer.

'They have decided to go to any length—even to the length of cutting my throat,' the Grandfather laughed contemptuously.

He paused for a moment and asked: 'Has the House of the Kurus fallen so low in the hands of your son and his friends that they have ventured to dictate to the Head of the House? Dhritarashtra, your blind love for Duryodhana has been the undoing of the House.'

Dhritarashtra heaved a sigh. 'I am weak. I can't bear to see my son's sufferings. I have nightmares . . .,' he could not continue any further.

'I see that you are very unhappy. But what grievances can Duryodhana have? He is the master of Hastinapura. At his suggestion you drove the rightful heirs of Pandu into the wilderness. If they converted the wilderness into a paradise it was through their own exertions. What Duryodhana wants now is to deprive them of Indraprastha.'

Dhritarashtra held up his hands in despair. 'What can I do?' he asked helplessly. 'He won't listen to my advice or his friends will not allow him to listen.'

The Grandfather said: 'It is getting late now. Have you anything more to tell me?'

'Only this . . .,' Dhritarashtra started speaking.

The Grandfather laughed contemptuously. 'My son, what has come over you? Are you not ashamed to ask me to submit to Duryodhana's blackmail?'

'No, no. I have not come to blackmail you, venerable Grandfather. I am frightened at the prospect of Duryodhana committing suicide.'

'Well—if not to blackmail, to frighten me. You think that I am too old to assert myself.' The old man's eyes flashed in anger.

'No, no. I do not say that,' said Dhritarashtra again folding his trembling hands.

'Please forgive me,' he continued.

'I again beg of you, Grandfather, not to give the foolish boys an opportunity to take any rash action,' requested the king.

'I understand: What you want is that righteous men should not be righteous lest the unrighteous may be provoked to murderous fury, isn't it? You have forgotten, son: Bhishma does not know what fear is.'

He paused and added curtly: 'My blessing, Dhritarashtra, you can go.'

CHAPTER 16

YUDHISHTHIRA SEEKS A FAVOUR

BHISHMA swayed his swing-bed furiously. He knew the situation. Most of the Rajanyas of the Kuru family had gone and settled in Indraprastha. Others who were left behind had transferred their loyalty to Duryodhana; there was no other alternative left to them if they wanted to live in Hastinapura.

He knew that the friends of Duryodhana had decided to defy him should he intervene in the game. He smiled. 'It is not so easy to deal with me', he muttered to himself.

He had just settled down in his bed when Vidura sought permission to come into the room. Bhishma sat up surprised. 'If Vidura has come at this time of the night, there must be something very important', he said to himself.

'Come in, Vidura', he said.

Vidura came into the room accompanied by a person whose face was veiled by his scarf.

'Who is this man?' asked the Grandfather.

Vidura's companion dropped the scarf from his face and prostrated himself before the Grandfather.

'Yudhishthira!' exclaimed the Grandfather in surprise. Yudhishthira stood with folded hands. 'You, at this hour of the night! What is it, Vidura?'

'Something very urgent, venerable Grandfather,' said Vidura. Then turning to Yudhishthira he said: 'Yudhishthira, you can tell the Grandfather what you wanted to say'.

'I want to beg a favour of you', said Yudhishthira. 'It is in connection with the royal game of dice to be played tomorrow'.

'Why did you accept the challenge, you fool', said the Grandfather in a severe tone. 'Why didn't you decline to come to Hastinapura? If you had not come, Duryodhana would never have had the courage to declare a war against you. Even if he did, he would have never won it'.

'May I speak?' asked Yudhishthira.

'Son, you may. But, by your weakness, you have exposed all of us to great danger'.

Yudhishthira folded his hands and with humility said: 'I may have been a fool. But now we are faced with difficulties; only you can save us. That is why I have come to beg a favour of you, venerable Grandfather'.

'What is it that you want?', asked Bhishma.

'My humble request is that the venerable Grandfather will not intervene in the game whatever happens, however dishonestly it is played', said Yudhishthira.

'What?' Bhishma sat up in his bed, rubbed his eyes and laughed dryly. 'Am I awake or asleep? Am I dreaming?'

'No, you are not dreaming, venerable Grandfather', said Yudhishthira. 'I have come here only to beg of you not to intervene in the game even if Shakuni plays it fraudulently'.

'Why do you want me not to intervene if the game is played fraudulently?' asked the Grandfather, his eyes opening wide in surprise.

Yudhishthira said in a low voice: 'Venerable Grandfather, before leaving Indraprastha, the Master made a prediction that there is going to be a massacre of *kshatriyas* in a huge war and that I will be the centre of it'.

'If the two branches of the Kuru family try to destroy each other, it is sure to be a vast war', said Bhishma.

'I shudder at the prospect of war. You know, venerable Grandfather, that it comes like a roaring lion swallowing human lives, littering the earth with the bones of heroes, broken chariots and dying horses. Women and children are rendered homeless and cows are butchered in hundreds'.

'Without the aid of the Master's prediction, for years now I have been seeing the war coming. If the House of the Kurus does not know what *dharma* is, who else can be righteous?' asked the Grandfather sadly.

The Grandfather could not help noting Yudhishthira's earnestness. Here was a man who lived in and for righteousness.

'Venerable Grandfather, forgive me. Righteousness is a *Yajna*. Those who serve it must always be ready to offer themselves to its sacred fire. After many sleepless nights, I realised that I must counter the Master's prediction—even at the cost of my life and the lives of my brothers, mother, wife and children'.

'Why did you come here if you did not want a war?' asked the Grandfather.

'If I had rejected the challenge, Duryodhana would have declared war against us', said Yudhishthira.

'I know,' said the Grandfather. 'He won't rest content till he has taken everything from you. But how can you stop him doing so?'

Yudhishthira looked down in humility. 'If the Gods have decided that Duryodhana shall rule over Indraprastha, who are we to oppose it. I won't let him take it; I will give it to him. Perhaps then he will be venom-free.'

'Give up Indraprastha!', exclaimed Bhishma in surprise.

'Yes, venerable Grandfather', replied Yudhishthira.

'What did your brothers, mother and the Princess of Panchala say about this strange decision of yours?'

'They don't know what I propose to do. When the challenge was brought to us by uncle Vidura, I told them to dissolve the pledge and let me go my own way. But they took the pledge again; they will not part company with me whatever I may do at the game'.

'You are offering your neck to your ruthless enemies. Do you realise that?' asked the Grandfather.

'Yes, if it prevents war', replied Yudhishthira.

The Grandfather said: 'My son, you won't be able to prevent it'. He thought for a while, turned to Vidura and asked: 'Vidura, what do you think?'

'Lord, I told the Five Brothers not to come to Hastinapura, but when I saw Yudhishthira's heroic strength, I had no heart to dissuade him. He wants to pass through fire to attain peace. He may not succeed, but the attempt is worth making'.

'Grandfather, forgive me', Yudhishthira said, his hands folded. 'I respect you more than my father. I worship you as a god on earth. That is why I have come to you. We have been reciting *shanti, shanti, shanti* every day, but though all are ready to die in a war, no one is prepared to die for peace. I want to make a total sacrifice to preserve peace. Let me not be *King Dharma* in name only, but in reality'.

After a pause he continued: 'We have taken up your valuable time, Grandfather. Kindly grant me this favour. Please don't intervene in the game whatever happens'.

'It is a very ridiculous situation', said the Grandfather with a dry laugh. 'Yudhishthira, you and Duryodhana, though disagreeing in everything else, are at least of one mind that I should not intervene in the game. On one side there is fraud, on the other side there is righteousness. Well, I love you, Yudhishthira. You have been a symbol of righteousness and you will remain such till the end. Go in for peace, fight for peace. I will not intervene till the game is finished'.

As the visitors left, the Grandfather raised both his hands: 'Oh, Great God! How long must I bear the burden of the Kurus?'

CHAPTER 17

THE THRONE HALL

YUDHISHTHIRA stepped into the Throne Hall, looked around and his happy associations with it were revived.

He and his brothers had first come to this Hall years ago when they were accepted as the sons of King Pandu. They were boys then, but the memory of that happy day had remained unforgotten.

Again, it was in this Hall that he was installed as Crown Prince of Hastinapura, and as such he had attended numerous ceremonials. Again, it was here that he was installed as the King of Kurus and here he and his brothers were given a send off to Hastinapura.

On all these occasions, there had been enthusiastic crowds to greet him and touch his feet in token of their respect.

A flood of *dharma* had flowed from this Hall as the sacred Ganga flows from Mount Kailas. Now it was the source of intrigue, sordidness and deceit.

God had willed that he should be offered as a sacrificial goat to the sacred fire of disaster which would engulf all the Five Brothers and their family.

At the same time, his inner being felt elated at his offering himself, his brave brothers and the fortunes of his family to secure peace—*shanti, shanti, shanti,*—for which the ancient Sages had laid down their lives.

At the side of the Hall, opposite the entrance, five thrones had been placed on a platform. The central two of them were for Grandfather Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra. When he was installed King of Hastinapura, he had prescribed the order of precedence by placing the Grandfather and the Uncle above himself as the King.

Next to them, at a lower level, on each side were placed thrones, one for Duryodhana and another presumably for himself.

Next to these, on each side was a throne, smaller in size, for Dronacharya and Kripacharya, who had been accorded the status of guardians of the Kuru empire.

Behind the thrones stood the *chamaries* (whisk-bearers) each with a whisk at her shoulder, like statues made of marble.

On each side, there were two seats encrusted with gold covered by deerskins, one reserved for Acharya Somadutt, the preceptor of the Kurus and another for Acharya Dhaumya, the preceptor of the Five Brothers.

On the right of the platform were seated the Srotriyas entitled to join in the ceremonial; on the left the Rajanyas of Hastinapura, other than the high-ranking Kuru Rajanyas, who were privileged to join the procession to the throne.

A little away from the throne, in the centre of the Hall, a low platform had been laid on which was placed a *Shariphalak*—the ivory plank on which the dice were to be thrown—and a silver jar containing the dice.

Yudhishthira could not help smiling to himself. These dice were merely a symbol of the total sacrifice that he was going to make to win peace.

A sense of coming tragedy was over him. He was going to rob his brothers of their heritage.

He glanced at Bhima, his brave and generous brother, who had stood by him in every crisis; his cheeks were now flushed and his eyes inflamed with anger.

Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva could not raise their eyes from the ground; out of sheer loyalty to him, they had surrendered their instincts and judgment. Naturally, they were in deep distress. He had always sought their happiness and now he was going to bury them under an avalanche of misfortune.

It was his paramount duty to protect Mother Kunti and keep the Princess of Panchala happy; now he himself had created a situation in which they were to live in misery and desolation.

However he was not troubled. The Sages had faced death to live by the truth. The ancient Sage Dandhichi had given his bones to the Gods so that they could triumph over the demons. Nothing could be accomplished without going through the fire of *tapas;* these trials which he was inviting were a very small price to pay for the peace he was to win.

The Rajanyas offered him salutations with folded hands, heads bowed to the ground. He noticed that some of them were unhappy. Many others could ill-conceal their sense of triumph, having hitched their wagon to the star of Duryodhana. They were awaiting the time when they would enjoy a share of the wealth and possessions of Indraprastha which Duryodhana was going to win.

There was tension in the air. Everyone was feeling the strain of what was to come.

Duryodhana, Dushasana, Karna and Shakuni came forward and greeted the Brothers.

When Duryodhana offered his salutation, Yudhishthira raised him from the ground, embraced him and said: 'Brother, may the Gods shower you with the choicest blessings'.

CHAPTER 18

LET THE GAME BEGIN

ACHARYA Somadutt and Acharya Dhaumya gave them a ceremonial welcome with appropriate *mantras.*

Yudhishthira and his brothers and Duryodhana and his lieutenants moved near the entrance to await the arrival of the Elders.

The Kauravas, Duryodhana and his brothers gloated over the device which had so successfully trapped the Five Brothers.

Yudhishthira smiled to himself; they did not know that their device was his opportunity.

When he found himself next to Duryodhana, he could not help making a last effort to win peace without the game. 'Is it necessary to play the game, brother?' he asked Duryodhana in a persuasive voice. 'We can have peace without it'.

'What is wrong with the game?', asked Duryodhana in reply.

'It would be better', said Yudhishthira, 'to go to war rather than play a game which flourishes on deceit. This gamble will destroy our friendship'.

Shakuni heard Yudhishthira's remark and with an ingratiating smile said: 'Eldest, why are you afraid to play? This is the game of kings'.

Yudhishthira smiled indulgently. 'Noble Shakuni, a man however wise becomes a fool or a trickster once he handles the dice. Let us not play the game'.

Shakuni with a sneer turned to the Rajanyas. Like a

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showman he said: 'You can easily understand why the Eldest does not want to play the royal game. He has acquired wealth at the *Rajasuya* for the first time in his life and so he does not want to part with it'.

There was derisive laughter from several Rajanyas. Then he turned to Yudhishthira and said: 'Keep your wealth, noble Eldest. You need not play if you are afraid to accept the challenge'.

He laughed contemptuously. Duryodhana's friends grinned in response.

Yudhishthira without taking notice of Shakuni's offensive remarks said: 'You are mistaken, noble Shakuni. I know no fear except the fear of committing *adharma*. I do not care about wealth either. But all this is immaterial. The noble lord of the Kurus has given a mandate that I must play the royal game and play I will, unless we jointly ask the lord to call off the game'.

Duryodhana said: 'May I make a request, Eldest. I am an indifferent player. So uncle Shakuni will play on my behalf'.

Yudhishthira knew that Shakuni, a magician at the game, was going to play against him. If Indraprastha was to be parted with, it might as well be done in the shortest time possible.

However, he said: 'Brother Duryodhana, I have never heard of this game being played by proxy. You must play and you must lay the wager'.

Shakuni came to Duryodhana's help. 'I see nothing wrong with this arrangement'. Then again with a sneer, he said: 'Eldest, you are only trying to find an excuse to escape parting with your wealth. However, if you do not want to play, why not tell us so frankly?'

Shakuni laughed; Duryodhana and Dushasana also joined in the laughter in a very offensive way. He knew very well that Yudhishthira could not withdraw from the game; if he did, he would be dubbed a coward, and would be cast off as a disgrace to the *Kshaatra*-tradition.

Shakuni added: 'Do you think that you will be cheated in playing with me? Well then, give up playing'.

'I already told you that the lord of the Kurus has given me the mandate and I will play', replied Yudhishthira.

Sharp blasts of conches were heard announcing the arrival of the Grandfather and King Dhritarashtra. Two chamberlains, with gold-topped maces, entered the Hall and stood on either side of the entrance.

As the two Elders entered the Hall, *Srotriyas* blessed them with their arms extended; others folded their hands and bowed their heads low.

The blind King was led by Minister Sanjaya. Dronacharya, Kripacharya and Aswatthama came next and after them came the high-ranking Kuru Rajanyas.

When the Grandfather's eagle eyes swept over the Hall, his face grew stern. He saw that a large section of the Rajanyas were carrying swords—a privilege which usually they did not exercise. Shakuni was prepared to face him if he intervened and that would be the end of the Kuru power.

The Five Brothers prostrated themselves before the Grandfather and the blind king; so did Duryodhana, Dushasana, Karna and Shakuni.

When Yudhishthira offered his salutation, the Grandfather lifted him from the ground, embraced him and breathed in the scent of his hair. Many Rajanyas were surprised at this mark of affection. They had been informed that the Grandfather was not going to intervene in this matter, but the honour of the embrace was not in keeping with that view.

The Grandfather admired the heroic determination of Yudhishthira, who was prepared to sacrifice himself and his family for the sake of peace. He felt happy that there was at least one member of the Kuru family who could stand by *dharma* against all odds.

The Elders took their seats on their thrones; the *Srotriyas* chanted their blessings; the high-ranking Rajanyas also took their seats in the enclosure reserved for them.

Minister Vidura and Sanjaya took their usual seats; one at the feet of the Grandfather and the other near the feet of King Dhritarashtra.

After receiving permission from the Grandfather and King Dhritarashtra, Vidura announced:

'The Grandfather and the Lord command: Let the game begin'.

CHAPTER 19

SHAKUNI AT HIS BEST

THERE was complete silence, as unconsciously many people present felt that this was more than a game—a struggle between the Gods and the Demons.

Yudhishthira offered his stake—jewels of the rarest hue. Duryodhana immediately staked all his jewellery.

Yudhishthira took the dice, rolled them between his palms and threw them on the *phalak*.

Shakuni took them, rolled the dice between his palms and threw them on the *phalak*.

The Grandfather could easily see that while throwing the dice on the *phalak*, Shakuni used his little finger to direct the favourable dice.

All except the Elders craned their neck to see what the result of the game was.

Dhritarashtra impatiently asked: 'Sanjaya, what has happened?'

Shakuni looked at the dice and said: 'Eldest, we have won'.

The Rajanyas who were anxious to oblige Duryodhana laughed and some even uttered the words *sadhu, sadhu,* but when they looked at the Grandfather, their enthusiastic sense of triumph was smothered. The old man's face was set in stern immobility.

Immediately Yudhishthira said: 'I now stake all jewellery, ornaments and gold which we have'. He was impatient to part with his possessions.

After Yudhishthira threw the dice, Shakuni gathered them in his hands, rolled them between his palms and threw them on the *phalak*. Shakuni's little finger played the trick again. 'We have won', announced Shakuni.

Tension mounted as game after game proceeded with unexpected celerity.

In game after game, Yudhishthira would announce the stakes; so would Duryodhana. He would then cast the dice. Shakuni would take up the dice, roll them between his palms and throw them on the *phalak,* his little finger active. He would then announce the result, as if performing a ritual—'Eldest, we have won'. And the friendly Rajanyas would thump their thighs with gleeful cries.

The Grandfather's eyes were fixed on Yudhishthira who, with a smile, threw the dice unhesitatingly.

In game after game Yudhishthira successively staked his ornaments, his chariots, his horses, his elephants, his army, his slaves, his treasures and his granary—and lost them. Every time, Shakuni would offensively declare the monotonous verdict: 'Eldest, we have won'.

Many Rajanyas had no heart to see the continuance of this game, when they saw Shakuni always resorting to a trick to win the game.

However, they were surprised at the cheerful way in which Yudhishthira behaved. They could only attribute it to the seasoned gambler's passion for more play and still more play.

When all the possessions of the Five Brothers were lost, Shakuni asked in a jeering tone: 'Well, Eldest, have you nothing more to wager. If you want to regain your possessions back, you must wager something really belonging to you'.

Vidura boiled with indignation as he saw that Shakuni was egging on Yudhishthira to play with his brothers as the stake.

Vidura realised that his perception, generally unerring, had failed him miserably in this matter. The object of the game, he saw, was not to win the wealth of the Five Brothers or their capital, Indraprastha; it was to deprive them of their status as the sons of Pandu and also as *kshaatra* Rajanyas by reducing them to the position of slaves.

Duryodhana was undoing all that the Grandfather and he had done to stabilise the political power of Hastinapura. He cursed himself for not being able to assess the intensity of the hatred which Duryodhana had nursed from his infancy.

Vidura turned to the blind King and touched his feet to intimate to him that he wanted to speak after the Grandfather had nodded mute assent.

When permission was granted, Vidura said: 'Lord, I beseech you: stop this game. We have been friends since we were in the cradle. I have served you faithfully all these years. I cannot remain silent. I must therefore warn you that Hastinapura is being rushed to its doom.'

Duryodhana and his lieutenants looked at Vidura angrily; they felt that soon enough the time would come to implement their decision they had taken the night before.

Vidura continued: 'Lord, do you remember what I told you about the significance of the dreadful omens which accompanied Duryodhana's birth. This son of yours would be the cause of destroying the world and the only way to save it from the catastrophe was to kill him'.

Vidura's solemn tone presaged a storm, everyone present felt.

'Noble King', Vidura continued, 'if the game is persisted in, the prophecy will be fulfilled. The way your son has been acquiring the wealth and possessions of the Five Brothers will surely invite the wrath of the Gods, and in your old age you will find your sons destroyed before you—yes, all your sons'.

Vidura continued: 'Your son, Duryodhana, has no courage to fight the Five Brothers in open war'. Pointing a finger at Shakuni, he added: 'With the help of this prince, he has robbed the Five Brothers of all they had. I beseech you: stop this play. If you don't the *kshatriyas* will destroy themselves fighting each other. If dharma is lost among the Kurus, the world which you have created will collapse. The *ashrams* will became charnel houses. The *kshatriyas* will destroy each other. The rest will be the helpless victims of brutal strength'.

He did not have a single word from the king in reply.

Duryodhana was furious; his brows knit together. With his hand on the hilt of his sword and flanked by Dushasana, he stepped in front of Vidura.

'Uncle, you are an adept at praising our enemies in our presence', he said, his voice quivering with passionate anger.

'You have maligned me since my childhood. You are a beast, biting the hand which feeds you. You are now trying to kill the affection my father has for me'.

He added with a sneer, his hands trembling with rage: 'Nothing better could be expected from the son of a palace maid'.

After a little pause, Duryodhana continued: 'You have been partial to the Five Brothers. Hereafter, you will not dare to be so.'

'Is he going to kill Vidura?' was the question which rose in the heart of everyone in the Hall.

Duryodhana proceeded contemptuously, his lips snarling: 'Do not worry about us, son of a maid. Keep your grief for your favourite nephews. They will soon be slaves.'

He laughed in scorn and loftily added: 'Whatever I am and whatever I may do now or in the days to come have been ordained by the Gods who have set me on the journey.'

Duryodhana looked at Vidura in concentrated malice and pulled his sword a little from its scabbard to indicate that he would be ready to slay Vidura if he dared to stand in his way.

CHAPTER 20

WE HAVE WON

DURYODHANA turned to the venerable patriarch to find out how he would react.

He saw the forefinger of the old warrior's right hand raised in warning.

He also saw Dronacharya reaching out for the battle-axe —the emblem of his status as the disciple of Parashurama, which he had placed near his throne.

As Duryodhana observed the gestures both of the Grandfather and Dronacharya, his courage failed him. He could not draw his sword.

He looked at his friends. They had begun to look upon him with contempt. They knew him to be volatile but never thought that he was such a coward as not to face the Elders, in spite of the decision they had taken at his instance the previous night to slay anyone who stood in the way.

Even Dushasana, who admired his brother as a hero, was disgusted.

When Duryodhana sat down by the *phalak*, Shakuni whispered to him: 'My dear boy, don't get disappointed. We will soon deprive the Five Brothers of their status as *kshatriyas*. You do not know your maternal uncle well if you think they can escape him.'

* * *

Yudhishthira had pledged himself to falsify the Master's prophecy regarding the coming war, but every step he took to bring peace between him and his cousins only brought the conflict nearer.

Yudhishthira had cheerfully lost his wealth, possessions and Indraprastha, hoping they would walk out of the Hall as beggars without a home.

Now, in a blinding flash he saw that there could be no peace between him and his cousins. Duryodhana's aim in staging this game had nothing to do with their wealth or possessions or even Indraprastha; it was to deprive them of their status as the sons of Pandu and as *Arya kshatriyas* by reducing them to slavery.

The Grandfather sat silent and grim. He realised that the age, of which he was the architect, was gone.

Vidura was the most respected member of the royal family not only because he was the foster brother of the King, but for his wisdom, his loving nature and his far-seeing statesmanship.

Duryodhana's insulting behaviour towards uncle Vidura in the royal assembly was not only an affront to Vidura, but to him. It was also a blow to the prestige of the Kuru House which he—Bhishma—had built up for several decades.

The ancient canons had prescribed the Arya code of honour according to which Aryas—men and women—cannot be bought or sold nor offered as an oblation to the God of Fire. The Great God Varuna had condemned this practice of human sacrifice when he broke the bonds of Sage Shunashepa who was tied to the sacrificial post.

Many of the Rajanyas murmured their disapproval but on seeing the Grandfather remaining silent, the murmurs died down.

Duryodhana returned to the platform where they had been playing the game and looked at the Rajanyas with a triumphant air. 'Go on with the game', he commanded.

Yudhishthira was desperate. All that was left to him was to maintain the unity of the Five Brothers; beggar or no beggar, the Five Brothers and Draupadi were one and indivisible.

He affectionately placed his hands on the shoulders of Nakula.

Bhima's eyes were blazing with anger. Were the brothers to be bought and sold as slaves? He wanted to remove Yudhishthira's hands from Nakula's shoulders, if necessary by force.

'My brother', Arjuna said to Bhima in a low voice. 'At this crucial moment in our life, please keep your temper under control'. Bhima gnashed his teeth and submitted to Arjuna's wishes.

Yudhishthira said in a low tone: 'King Vrikodara, have patience. What I am doing is the best that we can do'. He turned to Shakuni and said: 'I offer this young, dark and handsome brother of mine, Nakula, as a stake'.

Shakuni threw the dice and as expected won the wager. '*We have won*', he announced.

Yudhishthira was anxious to finish the game soon. He was afraid that if there was more discussion, the Grandfather might be induced to ban the game.

'Brother Sahadeva, the wisest of men, is my next wager,' said Yudhishthira. 'There is no one like him in the world.'

Yudhishthira threw the dice on the *phalak*. Shakuni took them and threw them also on behalf of Duryodhana. The same result followed: '*We have won*', announced Shakuni.

Nakula turned to Sahadeva and asked: 'What shall we do?' Sahadeva put his hand on his brother's shoulders and said laconically: 'Obey the Eldest'.

Nakula and Sahadeva stood up, removed their diadems and their swords and placed them at the feet of Bhishma as the Head of the Royal House of the Kurus.

'You have lost the Twins', said Shakuni to Yudhishthira with a sinister smile on his face. He said: 'Eldest, you are still left with two more brothers. The ancient canons prescribe that in the absence of the father, the eldest member of the family has a proprietory right over the whole family. Though we do not consider your stakes equal to the wealth of our King, we can afford to be generous; that is why we allowed you to use them as your wealth.'

Then he continued: 'What about your remaining brothers? Are they not good enough to be used as wagers or do you think that your brothers, Bhima and Arjuna, are more dear to you than the Twins? The Twins are after all your step brothers'.

Yudhishthira's anger was aroused, but he was anxious that all the Five Brothers and Draupadi should remain together even in slavery.

He said: 'Don't say that, noble Shakuni. You have already taken over all our possessions. Now you want to create dissension between us. But you will never succeed. The Five Brothers are as one and they will remain one whatever you may do. My next wager is Arjuna, the supreme archer'.

Dice were thrown as before by Yudhishthira and Shakuni. '*We have won*', announced the latter. Arjuna was lost.

There were tears in Yudhishthira's eyes when Arjuna in unruffled dignity stood up, took off his diadem and sword and placed them on the platform at the Grandfather's feet.

Dronacharya wa indignant. Arjuna was his favourite pupil and was unmatched as a master archer. As his guru, he had invested him with the diadem, bow and sword when he finished his education at his military school. He picked up the battle-axe which was lying near his throne.

'Grandfather, what is this?' asked Dronacharya. 'If given an opportunity, they would slay the Five Brothers here and now'.

Bhishma laid a restraining hand on Dronacharya's back and whispered: 'Not yet'.

'Here is Bhima,' said Yudhishthira.

'I will not be reduced to slavery', Bhima announced and was getting up when Yudhishthira pulled him back. 'King Vrikodara, you must be my wager. We shall be together—all of us. Wherever Arjuna and the Twins are, there we must be'.

He then turned to Shakuni and said: 'Here is King Vrikodara, the mighty military leader of my army. I stake him as my wager'.

The ritual of throwing the dice was again gone through. Then Shakuni announced: 'Eldest, *We have won*'. Bhima was lost.

Bhima got up from his seat with tears of frustration in his eyes, took off his diadem and sword and threw them at Bhishma's feet.

'The Grandfather has forfeited his claim to command the obedience and loyalty of the brothers. But I must be wherever my brothers are', thought Yudhishthira, and announced: 'Noble Shakuni, I am now willing to stake myself.'

'We are ready', replied Shakuni.

The ritual was once again gone through. Shakuni announced: *'We have won'*.

A tear was in the Grandfather's eye. Yudhishthira, so wise and selfless, reduced to slavery! No, never. He shaded his eyes with his palms.

Yudhishthira placed his diadem and sword at Bhishma's feet. When he bent low in salutation, the Grandfather gathered him in his arms and breathed in the scent of his hair. He then joined his brothers standing near the platform.

From Shakuni's leering lips, like drops of liquid fire, there issued these words: 'Eldest, though you style yourself *Dharmaraja*, the Lord of Righteousness, you have kept back something very precious, the beautiful Princess of Panchala'.

CHAPTER 21

DRAUPADI IS DRAGGED INTO THE THRONE HALL

BHIMA wanted to take hold of his mace which was lying at the Grandfather's feet, but Arjuna restrained him.

Yudhishthira saw clearly that as things were, Draupadi ought to be with them, the Five Brothers; the bond that kept them one shoud be maintained.

He said: 'I now offer as a wager the Princess of Panchala, daughter of the mighty King Drupad and the favoured queen of the Five Brothers'.

Before the people seated in the Hall could realise what was happening, Shakuni declared the result: *'We have won the Princess of Panchala. She is ours now'*.

Duryodhana's brothers and friends threw all restraint to the winds. Some embraced him; some others greeted him with 'Jai Duryodhana', 'Victory to Duryodhana'.

The joy of Duryodhana and Karna knew no bounds. Karna whispered to Duryodhana: 'She spurned us at her *swayamvara* and preferred Arjuna to us. I would have kidnapped her from the *swayamvara*, but you stopped me from doing so'.

'Now she is at our mercy. We can do whatever we like with her', replied Duryodhana.

Bhishma felt the disgrace which this event would bring to the Kuru House. In his presence, Draupadi, so noble, so respected and so loved, had been bartered away. Yudhishthira had been righteous all his life; today he had sacrificed himself, his brothers and their queen, all to win peace for the three worlds and particularly to stave off the impending conflict between the Five Brothers and the Kurus led by Duryodhana.

Dronacharya and Kripacharya could not understand the significance of the situation. They were overcome by shame and anger; they would have liked to intervene. But Grandfather, by a gesture, stopped them.

Scandalised by Duryodhana's conduct, Acharya Somadatt and Acharya Dhaumya left the hall, after begging Bhishma's permission. The leading *Srotriyas* followed them.

Vidura sat with his head between his hands praying to Mother Earth to forgive the Kurus for what they were doing. 'I wish I was dead', he murmured.

Dhritarashtra was happy, for he kept on asking Minister Sanjaya 'What have we won now, and now, and now?'

Ignoring the presence of Elders, Duryodhana embraced Shakuni. 'Uncle, this is the happiest day of my life and I owe it entirely to you', he said.

Then he turned to Vidura. 'Uncle Vidura, where were you when Draupadi insulted us at her *swayamvara* and exposed us to the ridicule of the assembled kings? She is now our slave. You must go and bring her here'.

Then with a sneer he added: 'It will be a rare honour for the Elders to receive a queen who is no longer a queen. After offering her salutation to us, her masters, she will be taken to the apartments meant for women slaves. She must become familiar with her duties'. He began to twirl his moustache.

Vidura rose from his seat and folded his hands before Duryodhana. 'Noble son of Dhritarashtra, even now it is not too late. Listen to me. Do not proceed further. Draupadi is not your slave. She was a *Kshaatra* princess. She is the daughter of one of the proudest Houses of Aryavarta. She is the consort of the Five Brothers'.

'The Queen!' exclaimed Dushasana jeeringly.

'Yudhishthira could not use her as a wager when he had lost his freedom himself', Vidura continued. 'You think that I am not your well-wisher, but I am. If you do not listen to my advice, you will be destroyed and all your friends and brothers along with you.'

Vidura broke down. After a while he raised his head, looked at Duryodhana and continued: 'Today your eyes are blinded. Otherwise, you would have realised the dire consequences which are sure to follow'. Tears rolled down the Minister's cheeks.

'Stop your chatter, old man', said Duryodhana, raising his voice. 'Don't talk any more. We have now had enough of your wisdom. Low born as you are, you are afraid of dangers. We *Kshatriyas* are born to face all dangers. The Gods are always with us.'

Duryodhana turned to an attendant and said: 'Praatikaami, go to the women's apartments and tell the slave Draupadi that she now belongs to me and I want her to come to the Throne Hall immediately to offer her salutation to her master'.

Noting the fear in the attendant's eyes, he continued: 'Are you afraid of the consequences which Vidura has just described? Don't be afraid. The Five Brothers are now our slaves and so is the daughter of Panchala'.

The attendant went to the women's apartments. On enquiry he found that the Princess of Panchala was in the room set apart for the women of the royal family during their periods of impurity.

Draupadi was all along expecting some dire calamity. When she saw Praatikaami coming hastily towards her apartment, her heart sank. She had a premonition that the Eldest would sacrifice all of them to secure the peace of the Three Worlds.

Folding his hands, Praatikaami stood outside the door of the apartment. He then bowed low and said: 'Noble Queen, I have been sent to invite you to the Throne Hall'.

'To the Throne Hall and in my present condition! How is that possible?' asked Draupadi.

'Forgive me, noble Queen. I cannot speak the truth, yet I cannot lie. The noble Lord Yudhishthira has gambled you away to the mighty Lord Duryodhana, who now requests your presence in the Hall'.

Draupadi was stunned. When she captured her self-composure, she asked: 'What are you saying, Praatikaami? Has my Lord lost his senses? How can he gamble me away?'

The attendant folding his hands, said: 'The noble King Yudhishthira first lost all his possessions and belongings; then he lost his brothers one by one, then himself, and after he had lost his status as a *Kshatriya*, he lost you'.

Draupadi was wild with rage. 'Go back to the Throne Hall and enquire of Aryaputra, my lord, the son of King Pandu, whether he lost me before or after he forfeited his freedom'.

The attendant went back to the Throne Hall. He saluted Yudhishthira and said: 'Lord, the august Princess of Panchala wants to know whether you lost her before you forfeited your freedom or after'.

Yudhishthira felt suffocated by the intensity of his emotions. He could not speak; besides he did not want any discussion in the Throne Hall on the propriety of Draupadi's being offered as a wager.

Duryodhana was furious and told the attendant: 'Let that woman come here and ask the question herself'.

Praatikaami went back to Draupadi and told her that the noble Lord Yudhishthira had not given any reply, while the noble Lord Duryodhana insisted on her coming to the Throne Hall.

When Praatikaami conveyed Duryodhana's commands, Draupadi said: 'Go back to the Throne Hall and ask my lord, the noble son of Pandu, what I ought to do. I will obey him and no one else'.

As he went back to the Throne Hall, Praatikaami felt as if he was passing through a fiery ordeal. He was doomed, he thought, because neither the Five Brothers nor Duryodhana was going to save him, the poor carrier of messages. He gave Draupadi's message. Yudhishthira did not say a word. How could he explain his motive for gambling away Draupadi?

'Tell her that I want her to come here and ask the Elders in the Hall what she should do,' said Yudhishthira.

The attendant, Praatikaami, stood as if rooted to the earth. He dared not disobey Duryodhana, nor did he dare to face the righteous anger of Draupadi.

Duryodhana turned to his brother, Dushasana. 'Brother, the attendant is afraid. You must go to the women's apartments yourself and bring Draupadi to the Throne Hall. She will not dare to disobey you; she is only a slave'.

Dushasana wore a triumphant air. Not only the Five Brothers but their queen, the Princess of Panchala, were now their slaves.

He went to the women's apartments and with a sinister laugh told Draupadi that she had been commanded by the noble King Duryodhana to come to the Throne Hall. She refused to come. He said: 'Come, come. You are no longer a Kuru Princess. You are now a slave. But don't be afraid. You are under the protection of the mighty Kuru Prince Duryodhana'.

Dushasana was enjoying Draupadi's anguish. He laughed and said: 'Don't be so modest. After all, we are the cousins of your husbands'.

She looked at Dushasana, her eyes wide with horror and took a step or two towards the apartment of Gandhari, the mother of Duryodhana.

Dushasana was not going to let her escape him. He strode angrily towards her, grasped her long black hair and began to drag her towards the Hall. It was a terrible thing to do. All her appeals to Dushasana only evoked more insulting words from him.

'My brother, Duryodhana, wants you to come to the Throne Hall. You are a slave. My brother won you at the game of dice'.

The single piece of cloth in which she was wrapped was wet with tears.

Draupadi entered the Throne Hall.

CHAPTER 22

KRISHNA! KRISHNA! WHERE ARE YOU?

WITH a voice quivering with indignation, the Queen of the Pandavas, facing the Grandfather, said: 'I see here the Elders of this ancient House of the Kurus, reputed from time immemorial, for upholding *dharma*. Even in their presence *adharma* has reared its head like a venomous cobra'.

She pointed a finger at Duryodhana and said: 'Here is a man drunk with power who asked his cruel brother to drag a woman and that a queen of the Kuru family, to this Hall'.

After a pause, she continued: 'In your presence, I ask my lord, Aryaputra, the son of Emperor Pandu, as to who was first lost as a stake in gambling, himself or me?'

Her voice which was weak and quivering gathered strength as she spoke. Turning to Bhishma, she asked: 'I ask you, Grandfather, the head of the royal Kurus, to answer my simple question. Do you consider me a slave or a free woman?'

She looked with contempt at her husbands. Yudhishthira, overcome by grief at the plight to which Draupadi, the noble Princess, was reduced, sat with his head bent down; he had not the courage to face the queen whom he had bartered away.

Draupadi, the noble Princess, was very angry. She turned to Bhishma with ferocity. 'We honour you as the very image of courage and learning. There is no one among the Kurus who is wiser than you, Grandfather. Will you give me an answer to my question?'

Bhishma cleared his throat, looked at Dushasana who was standing near Draupadi with his sword drawn, and said: 'I am indeed at a loss to give a proper answer to your question. The subtle shades of *dharma* are very hard to understand'.

He paused for a while and continued: 'Once a man has lost all he had and declared that he has been won at the game, he cannot use his wife as a stake.'

Duryodhana and his friends began to feel that the old man was foisting a quibble on them. Many of them exchanged angry glances and waited for Duryodhana's instructions.

The Grandfather did not want to precipitate the crisis, so he raised his hand to command silence.

'On the other hand', he continued, 'whether a man has lost all his possessions in gambling or not, he is free to pledge his wife.'

'Yudhishthira knew that Shakuni was a pastmaster in the art of gambling and yet he played with him willingly enough, with the noble Princess of Panchala as the wager. I am not able to answer your question'.

Draupadi was furious. 'Grandfather, you are mistaken in thinking that Aryaputra came here willingly. He did not. He said as much to uncle Vidura at Indraprastha'.

'Then why did he come?', interrupted Duryodhana.

'The noble Aryaputra was told that it was a game to which he had been invited. Revered Elders, look at the inequity. The Eldest was invited to play a game with Duryodhana. Once he was in Hastinapura,, he was made to play with Uncle Shakuni.' After a pause she continued: 'The noble Aryaputra had no chance of winning the game against Shakuni. You all knew it. I ask you, Grandfather, why did you not stop the unfair game? You are the Head of the House of the Kurus. Why did you not condemn Duryodhana for what he was doing.'

She waited for a while and continued: 'You say that Aryaputra played the game of his own free will; that he willingly used me as a wager. I ask you this question: Is this Hall pledged to *dharma* or has it ceased to be the guardian of *dharma?* My venerable father, the Lord of Panchala, used to say that there is no *sabha* where there are no elders; men are not elders if they do not speak what is true; where there is no truth, there is no righteousness.'

Dushasana interrupted her with loud laughter. He turned to her and said: 'You are now the slave of Duryodhana who won you in a fair game. Why do you worry about the subtleties of *dharma?* You are a slave. Your *dharma* is to please your new master, the great Kaurava monarch, Duryodhana'.

Draupadi looked at Dushasana as if her fiery glance like that of Lord Shiva, would reduce him to ashes, but she did not speak a word.

Bhima could not restrain himself. He trembled like a leaf. He looked at Yudhishthira with contempt and said: 'Look at the result of your madness. You gambled away everything that we had. You gambled us all away; you reduced me to the status of a slave. I did not mind that. But this I will not suffer.' He shook his mane like an angry lion. 'Look at the Princess of Panchala, dragged into this Hall like an animal hauled to a slaughter house. How can I bear this any longer? Sahadeva, bring me fire. I must burn the hands of the Eldest which bartered her away.'

Arjuna was very sorry to see Bhima bubbling with wrath. He put a hand on his shoulder and said: 'Bhima, what has come over you? You have never been so abusive to the Eldest before. We always gave him the respect due to our father.'

Bhima interrupted impatiently. 'True, we respected him

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but now his hands deserve to be burnt. Look at this poor princess. We were pledged to maintain her as a queen when we married her. Does not your blood boil to see her thus bartered away?'

Arjuna replied: 'Of course, I am also angry. So is the Eldest. Don't you see his heart is broken, as ours are? Can you not see his suffering? Don't add to his unhappiness by showing your anger against him. Our enemies always wanted to see us quarrel. Till now we have been always united as one life in six bodies. Our enemies are happy now. We are now quarrelling with the Eldest.'

With great difficulty, Arjuna was able to pacify Bhima. The lifelong habit of respecting the Eldest came to the rescue.

Vikarna, one of Duryodhana's younger brothers, could not contain himself.

Turning to Draupadi, he said: 'Noble Queen, you are right. There is no righteousness in this Hall. Why did you not, Grandfather, condemn the act of the noble Yudhishthira in pledging the Queen? Even the Elders of this House of Kurus did not repudiate Yudhishthira when he pledged you as a wager.'

The solemnity with which Vikarna spoke these words had an immense effect on the audience. Everyone's attention was pinned on him.

Turning to the Rajanyas he asked: 'Why are you all silent now? Is there no one amongst us who has the courage to defy Duryodhana and speak the truth? Venerable Grandfather, I will say what I feel even if it is the last act of my life.

'The noble Duryodhana has fallen from his high status. Yudhishthira had no right to use her as a wager. The noble Queen is not only the wife of Yudhishthira but of all the Five Brothers. I ask you, Venerable Grandfather, how without the consent of his brothers, Yudhishthira could pledge Draupadi, the noble Princess of Panchala, as a wager? How can we call her a slave? She has not been lost to the Kaurava monarch. She is free.' Vikarna's words had a tremendous effect on the Rajanyas present there except for a few who were pledged to Duryodhana.

Karna was furious at Vikarna. He stood up and said: 'Vikarna, you think that you are wiser than all the Elders gathered here, don't you? All the people here, including the noble Grandfather, Dhritarashtra, Dronacharya, Kripacharya and many venerable Rajanyas have accepted Draupadi as a slave.

'Look at her husbands, the great warriors. They claim to be Rajanyas. If they thought that she was not a slave, why did they allow her to be called here? And what is the status of her husbands? The canons of *dharma* do not apply to them, for five of them share the same woman.

'She is a woman held in common. She is shameless. Now she is not ashamed to appear in front of so many eminent men in the Hall. Vikarna, you claim to be wiser than all of us but you need not fear that her modesty is outraged by her appearance before us. The Five Brothers have no right to wear even the clothes they have on. Dushasana, remove the clothes from these five men, and also from Draupadi, and surrender them to their lawful owner, Duryodhana.'

In response to these cruel words of Karna's, the Five Brothers removed their upper cloths, and laid them before Duryodhana.

Draupadi naturally would not remove the only piece of cloth in which she was wrapped. Dushasana thereupon took hold of a corner of her cloth and began to remove it forcibly.

Draupadi was frantic with dismay. She looked at her husbands one by one; they would do nothing to save her from dishonour. She looked at the Elders, hoping for support from someone. No one moved.

She felt helpless. Her mind turned to Krishna Vaasudeva, her brother by adoption, her guide and friend. She closed her eyes, joined her palms and with intense helplessness, she invoked Krishna Vaasudeva sobbing all the while. 'Krishna Vaasudeva, where are you? You alone can save me. Krishna, Krishna, where are you? I surrender myself to you. Rescue me from this demon. *Hey Krishna Govinda Harey Murare Hey Natha Narayana Vasudeva!*'

CHAPTER 23

THE SUPREME MANDATE

AS Draupadi invoked Krishna to save her, the sky became bright with a rare brilliance. At her invocation, Dushasana saw an orb as of the mid-day sun whirling round and round and a continuous sheet of light flowing from it and enveloping her. Dushasana almost saw in the orb the face of Sri Krishna, as it looked when he destroyed Sishupal A shudder went through his body.

Dushasana looked at the orb awe-struck. He felt that his hands which had been pulling at Draupadi's clothes had become numb, crippled and lifeless. The corner of the upper cloth slipped from his hands and Dushasana fell down.

Draupadi worshipfully looked at the shining orb. 'He has come—My Lord, My Master, My Saviour', she said to herself in tears.

The orb disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. The brilliance faded into a dream light which dissolved into the sunshine.

The tall and powerfully built figure of the Grandfather emerged with the mighty battle-axe, which had been given to him by his Master Parashurama, when he completed his training in the art of war.

The lifelong habit of paying reverence to the Grandfather asserted itself. Even Draupadi's sobs were hushed as she gathered her cloth to veil her body and receded into the background.

The Grandfather stepped down from the platform and raised his right arm, in a command to be silent. As he raised his arm, the royal chamberlain, standing behind the throne, blew his conch.

When the blast was over, the Grandfather lowered his arm and turned to the Rajanyas, who appeared rooted to the earth, unable to move and unable to speak.

'Noble Chiefs, I give you the supreme mandate of the Kuru Chief; whoever defies it dies.

'My venerable father, the Emperor Shantanu, now in Heaven, issued it only once in his lifetime, when he summoned the Kurus to fight the Haihaya invaders who threatened to destroy the Aryas. So far I have had no occasion to issue it.

'But now once again the very basis of Aryan life is threatened. Sons of the Mighty Emperor Kuru, obey the Mandate. Place your swords on the ground in front of me,' said the Grandfather.

Each Rajanya looked to see what his neighbour was going to do but at the same time those who were in the conspiracy looked helplessly at Duryodhana, who did not know what to do.

Duryodhana seemed frightened, his eyes wide open. He shuddered, as he saw the mighty weapon of Parasurama. The Grandfather would cut him down mercilessly, if he resisted him.

The Grandfather, after a pause, said: "Obey the Mandate". His voice was charged with irresistible authority.

Should he submit to the old man's oppressive command, or should he disobey him?

The Grandfather's eyes were fixed on Duryodhana. 'Do you disobey the Mandate?' he demanded.

Duryodhana felt like choking.

The Grandfather turned to Dhritarashtra and spoke in a low voice: 'My son, it was just a pastime to which you had invited the Five Brothers. The game is over now; isn't it, my son?'

Dhritarashtra at this crisis forgot everything that he had said or done so far and said: 'Yes, Grandfather, it was a game. The game is over now'. Then he added: 'Grandfather, the game is over, and the stakes can be returned.'

'My son, you are right,' replied the Grandfather. 'Announce the Mandate.'

Dhritarashtra said, his lips trembling: 'The Five Brothers and Draupadi are free. All the possessions and territories which you sons won in the game must be returned to them.

'Noble Kurus, obey the Mandate. If any of you disobeys, he must offer his neck to the Head of the House of Kurus'.

The Grandfather turned to Shakuni: 'Noble Shakuni, the game is over now and you will no longer be allowed to teach the Kurus how to maintain *dharma*.'

Then, turning to Duryodhana, he said: 'My son, this sacred house of Kuru Power cannot become a slaughter house for Kurus'.

CHAPTER 24

TO THE FOREST

THE Five Brothers put on their formal dress and recovered their weapons.

When departing Bhima turned to Duryodhana and said: 'Don't think we will stop at this. You are our arch enemy and I am going to kill you. Don't think any one of you will escape.'

Arjuna intervened: 'I also pledge myself to kill Karna, the son of Radha and his supporters.' Karna looked at Arjuna contemptuously.

Sahadeva said: 'Shakuni, you are a disgrace to the Gandhaaras. I will also face you in the battle-field and kill you.' Shakuni laughed cynically and added: 'If you are not killed before.'

Nakula said: 'I also am going to kill Uluka, your son.'

Yudhishthira, who was listening to the vows taken by his brothers, raised his hand in warning and said: 'My brothers, do not become a prey to anger and abandon the path of *dharma*. When Radheya insulted the noble Princess of Panchala, I too wanted to kill him. But I could not be angry with him. He is brave and generous. The Fates have done him great injustice.'

The Rajanyas dispersed. Duryodhana did not dare even to look at his Rajanya friends.

* * *

When the blind King, who was being led by Minister

Sanjaya, heard the oaths taken by the Five Brothers, he was gripped with fear. Turning to Draupadi, he said: 'Your husbands and you are free from bondage. Do you want anything more? Ask for some other favours.'

Draupadi replied: 'I was more than satisfied when you announced that my husbands would be free'.

Gathering her upper cloth in her hands, she left the hall.

Duryodhana with Dushasana and Radha's son Karna also left the hall.

Regardless of his brothers' oaths, Yudhishthira prostrated himself before the blind king, Dhritarashtra, and said: "Uncle, we have always carried out your wishes. If you tell us what they are, we will fulfil them.'

Dhritarashtra was carried away by the generous manner in which Yudhishthira promised to abide by his wishes. In a weak voice he said: 'I am very pleased at your humility. You are wise, good and noble. Forget all the unhappy things which happened today. Forgive my sons for the sins committed by them. Take back all that you have lost in the game and go to Indraprastha.'

Yudhishthira listened to his uncle with due humility.

* * *

Duryodhana was frustrated and furious. He had hoped to reduce the Five Brothers and Draupadi to slavery or slay them if they resisted. But his luck had failed him throughout.

The next day the Five Brothers and Draupadi with all their retinue, elephants, chariots and horses, got ready to leave for Indraprastha.

Duryodhana, when he saw these preparations, rushed to his father like a mad man and said: 'What is this, Father? You have permitted the Five Brothers to leave Hastinapura.

They were very strong, so we decided to take their kingdom and enslave them by a trick. We succeeded in it. We insulted them by taunts, sneers and abuses, even by outraging the modesty of their royal spouse. We thought that you at least would not betray us, but you did; you restored them their status in the *Kshaatra* hierarchy, and their kingdom. We have kindled their wrath. They will now be more dangerous than before.'

Duryodhana paused and continued: 'Did you listen to the terrible vows they took? From now on they will be planning ways to destroy us.'

Duryodhana was excited, perturbed and almost breathless. He continued: 'Father, did you not see the fire in Draupadi's eyes when she was being disrobed? Do you think the King of Panchala will remain quiet when he hears about the outrage committed against his daughter? Do you think Dhristadyumna will keep quiet when he hears how we treated his sister?'

Dhritarashtra said: 'My son, I am doing everything for your benefit.'

Duryodhana replied: 'And in so doing, you are ruining us.'

The blind king said: 'Don't say that, my son. You are the only person whom I love. Show me the way and I will take it'.

Duryodhana said: 'There is only one way. I have consulted uncle Shakuni. Let there be one more game. The one who wins it will rule over the entire kingdom and the other who loses it will leave for the forest and live there for twelve years and in the thirteenth year he must live undiscovered. If he is discovered he will have to spend another twelve years in the forest! Let us gamble on that.'

Dhritarashtra said: 'How can I do that? How can I call them back?' He felt helpless.

'If you call Yudhishthira he will not refuse', said Duryodhana. 'Our uncle Shakuni is there and we are sure to win the game. In twelve years we will have gathered more strength.'

Gandhari, his mother, intervened: 'My son, we should have taken Vidura's advice and destroyed you the moment you were born. You are the root cause of all our misfortunes. Even now it is not too late to repent. The Five Brothers will, I am sure, forgive you. Don't mislead your father.'

Dhritarashtra in a weak voice said: 'I cannot refuse my son anything. I love him and he loves me. I will follow his advice.'

* * *

A messenger was sent to the Five Brothers. He came to Yudhishthira, offered his salutation and conveyed King Dhritarashtra's message: "Please come back to Hastinapura. Duryodhana wants to play another game of dice to decide about the future. That is the only way to prevent the fratricidal war.'

The other brothers and Draupadi cautioned Yudhishthira and advised him not to go to Hastinapura again. The Eldest however was very firm. He said: 'I cannot refuse my uncle anything. I will obey him. If no settlement is arrived at, war will follow.'

* * *

The same hall. The same dice. The same Shakuni with his sinister smile. The Elders, Srotriyas and the leading Rajanyas had not been invited.

When Yudhishthira was called upon by Duryodhana to play, there was a protest from some of the Rajanyas. Duryodhana told them: 'What is there unusual in this? We want to stave off a bloody war. The best way to do so will be to get a breathing space. Twelve years are sufficiently long a period to calm all passions down.'

The hated dice were rolled on the *phalak*. *"We have won,"* cried Shakuni. The brothers protested. But Yudhishthira declared that he had lost the wager and would go to the forest for twelve years and live the thirteenth year *incognito* and if their identity was revealed before the thirteenth year ended, they would go to the forest again for a further period of twelve years.

Dushasana called Bhima a "bull" and Duryodhana's friends took up the clue and jeered at them.

When Dushasana abused them in filthy words, Bhima said: 'Because of the foul trick played by your maternal uncle, you have won the kingdom. I swear again that I am going to kill you, Dushasana, and tear your heart out. Wait. Only fourteen years more and then you will all be killed.'

Yudhishthira took leave of all the elders. He was happy; he had bought peace for twelve years.

When they were departing Vidura blessed them: 'The Gods will protect you and help you to fulfil your oaths. The sons of Dhritarashtra are all doomed. Leave Mother Kunti with me. She is so delicate that she will not be able to bear the strain of the journey.'

All the people of Hastinapura were moved to tears, when they saw Draupadi dressed in bark clothes, with her long hair unbraided, covering her face and shoulders.

Kunti was heart-broken when she saw misfortune overwhelming the glamorous Princess of Panchala. She embraced her and said: 'Please be kind to my sons. I know that they are responsible for all that has happened. They are alive today because of your love.'

The Five Brothers accompanied by the preceptor Dhaumya left Hastinapura, Bhima boiling with rage, Arjuna waiting for the war, Nakula anxious to meet his favourite horses in the battle-field, Sahadeva as inscrutable as ever, Yudhishthira unperturbed and Dhaumya miserable and unhappy.

* * *

Sanjaya, the King's Minister in attendance, could not suppress his feelings. He said to Dhritarashtra: 'Your behaviour in the hall was unforgivable. You were worse than your sons. You will have to face a terrible life hereafter.'

Dhritarashtra asked Vidura how the departure of the Five Brothers passed off. Vidura replied: 'The citizens of Hastinapura wanted to accompany them, but Yudhishthira persuaded them to go back to their homes.'

KRISHNAVATARA

VOLUME VIII

THE BOOK OF KURUKSHETRA

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

In his Introduction to Vol. VII of *Krishnavatara* Dr. K. M. Munshi wrote:

"I hope to carry forward the series till the episode when, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Krishna reveals Himself as the Eternal Guardian of the Cosmic Law—*Saashvata Dharma Gopta*—to Arjuna, if it is His will that I should do so."

These words were written by the author only on 26th January 1971, but alas! his end came suddenly on 8th February, 1971.

He could write only thirteen chapters of what he intended as the Part VIII.

Rather than publish an unfinished Part VIII of *Krishnavatara* separately, we are including those thirteen chapters too in this Volume as an Appendix.

CHAPTER 1

AGRAPUJA

ARYAVARTA was in turmoil, as the most powerful Aryan clan, the Bharatas or Kurus as they were called, was split into two warring camps after the death of Emperor Shantanu.

Emperor Shantanu's sons—Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya—died young. In order that the Emperor's line might not terminate, it was decided that the Best among the sages, Veda Vyaasa, should beget sons by *niyoga* on the two spouses of Vichitraveerya—princesses Ambika and Ambalika.

Ambika begot a son who was born blind and named Dhritarashtra; Ambalika begot Pandu, who was weak in health.

According to the ancient canons, Dhritarashtra could not succeed to the throne as he was born blind. Pandu occupied the throne of Hastinapura for a short time.

Pandu's senior wife Kunti begot by *niyoga* three sons named Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna, and Madri, the junior wife, begot twins—Sahadeva and Nakula.

When Pandu died, Madri joined him on the funeral pyre, entrusting her two sons to Kunti, who thus became the mother of the five sons known as "Pandavas or Five Brothers".

Dhritarashtra had several sons, who came to be called "Kauravas"; the eldest of them was Duryodhana and the next one Dushasana.

Satyavati, the dowager Empress of Shantanu, and Grandfather Bhishma accepted the Five Brothers as the sons of

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Pandu, and Yudhishthira being the eldest of them was anointed the Crown Prince.

A bitter power struggle between the Kurus and the Five Brothers began at Hastinapura.

The Yadavas, under the leadership of Krishna, son of Vasudeva, acquired great strength. His next step was to make the Five Brothers—his cousins—a dominant factor in the life of Aryavarta by securing for them, at a *Swayamvara*, Draupadi, the daughter of Drupad, the powerful King of Panchala.

When Krishna discussed with the Five Brothers the ways and means of performing Rajasuya, he said to Yudhishthira that Rajasuya could not be performed without dealing with Jarasandha.

'I know', said Yudhishthira, 'that Jarasandha has been trying in vain to acquire overlordship over Arya rulers. On the other hand, you and Balaram have been honoured as the natural leaders of the Arya world. His hatred towards both of you has been intensified as all his efforts to destroy you have ended in failure'.

'If you perform Rajasuya successfully, it will symbolise your hegemony over kings', said Krishna. 'However, it will not be successful unless important Rajanyas accept your invitation or acknowledge your pre-eminence. Jarasandha would never let this happen', continued Krishna.

'It would mean war', said Yudhishthira.

'I know your horror of war', said Krishna indulgently. 'I also do not like a war to establish your pre-eminence. But suppose we deal with Jarasandha without an armed conflict, what then?'

Yudhishthira nodded his assent. He said: 'I would not like men butchered and women molested to gain the status of Chakravarti. I would rather do without the Rajasuya'.

'I know you well, Eldest', said Krishna indulgently. 'If we were to perform Rajasuya with the force of arms, you would back out. But if we find out a way of performing Rajasuya without resorting to an armed conflict, would you have any objection to it?', asked Krishna.

Yudhishthira laughed aloud. 'It would be a magic'.

Krishna said: 'Once I killed my uncle Kamsa in a body combat. It saved us from an armed conflict.'

'What is the way to avoid an armed conflict?', asked Yudhishthira.

'There is only one way to make Rajasuya successful without an armed conflict; permit Bhima, Arjuna and myself to go to Rajagriha and deal with Jarasandha'.

* * *

The three of them permitted by Yudhishthira, went to Rajagriha, the capital of Jarasandha, where, in a body combat, Bhima killed Jarasandha.

When they returned to Indraprastha, preparations for holding Rajasuya were taken up in hand.

'One of the essentials of the Rajasuya, according to the ancient canons', said Yudhishthira, 'is the initial ceremony of offering *Agrapuja* to a *Muni* or a King of the highest distinction, constituting him the Guardian of *Dharma—Dharmagopta*.

He paused for a while and continued: 'The most appropriate person to be worshipped by *Agrapuja* is yourself'.

Krishna said: 'Eldest, I am not blind to realities. I am not qualified to receive *Agrapuja*. I am not a king by birth. I have no kingdom of mine, no army of mine. My main aim is not to win kingdoms, not even to secure the status of Chakravarti. I only want to uplift the Rajanyas by *Brahmatej* being wedded to *kshaatratej* in their lives'.

Yudhishthira replied: 'Vaasudeva, most of the Munis and Rajanyas present in the Assembly feel that though you are not a Chakravarti technically, you have already acquired the status and power as the Guardian of *Dharma—Dharmagopta*—a dignity which many a *Chakravarti* does not possess —and that *Agrapuja* should be offered to you'.

With the blessings of the Master, Muni Krishna Dvaipaayana, and of the family preceptor, Dhaumya, and endorsed by Grandfather Bhishma and other leading Rajanyas, *Agrapuja* was offered to Krishna.

This made Shishupal, King of Chedi, a friend of Jarasandha and one of the leaders of the Rajanyas who were against Krishna, mad with rage. He had been looking forward to being offered the *Agrapuja* to himself in the Assembly.

When he saw that Krishna was offered *Agrapuja* at the instance of Grandfather Bhishma, he openly abused Krishna and Bhishma before the Assembly of *srotriyas* and kings in the Hall of Sacrifice.

Shishupal reached the depth of vulgarity. He went to the length of alleging that Bhishma, universally venerated, was the son of Ganga who received a number of men indiscriminately.

The whole Assembly was shocked to hear one abuse after another being hurled at Krishna. It was, however, well-known that Krishna had promised Srutasrava, mother of Shishupal and sister of his father, Vasudeva, that he would not kill her son till Shishupal had abused him a hundred times.

No sooner Shishupal crossed the limit, Krishna invoked his miraculous *Chakra*—the irresistible weapon, which he alone can work—and killed him.

The Rajasuya escaped disaster only because of Krishna's valour and the support given to him by the Master, Dvaipaayana Vyaasa, who saw in Krishna the only force which could revitalise *Kshaatra-dharma*.

Most of the Arya Kings and the leading *srotriyas* had come to respect him for his wisdom, power and statesmanship. *Sudarshana Chakra,* the weapon with which he killed Shishupal, was a dreaded instrument of divine power—it came to his hands through air.

A new Krishna emerged from the conflict with Jarasandha and Shishupal. People were familiar with kings who were only too anxious to extend their power over other kings by pressure or by war; *dharma* was subsidiary to them.

On the other hand, Krishna had acquired all the qualifications of a Chakravarti. He was fighting for *dharma* without embarking upon military campaign. He had shown a new technique of winning power by removing only the hostile leaders and winning the moral support of *srotriyas* and Rajanyas. Naturally his moral authority had grown to immense proportion.

Wherever Krishna went, people came forward to offer him worship; quarrels among them were dissolved and a burning sense of responsibility to preserve *dharma* developed.

Under the twin influences of the Muni Dvaipaayana and Krishna, *Kshaatratej* was also becoming part of *Brahmatej.*

CHAPTER 2

THE CHALLENGE

AFTER the Rajasuya, the sacrificial session, was over, the Five Brothers requested Krishna to stay back in Indraprastha for a few days, for all the members of the family, old and young, loved him.

In the meantime, something terrible had happened: Shalva, the mlechha King of Saubha, had raided Saurashtra and sacked Dwaraka. The messenger sent by Uddhava gave lurid details of the calamity and conveyed his request to Krishna to return at once.

The messenger prostrated before Krishna and with folded hands, said: 'Lord, Shalva crossed the river Lavanika (modern Luni) and spread terror in Saurashtra. The mansions of the Yadavas and the huts of the villagers were reduced to ashes; even women and children were not spared.

'Seeing the army of King Shalva approaching Dwaraka, the noble princes of the Vrishni family sallied forth to give him a fight.

'In the first conflict, noble Samba attacked Kshemavriddhi, the minister and the commander of Shalva's army. Overwhelmed by the arrows of noble Samba, he fled from the field.

'Then Vegavan, a powerful lieutenant of Shalva, rushed at noble Samba, who hurled a swift-going mace. Struck with it, Vegavan fell on the ground.

'Then Vivindha, a well-known Danava, rushed upon the noble Charudeshna, your son, who, inflamed with anger, attacked him with a mace. Vivindha fell dead.

'Seeing the leader killed and the army in complete disarray, Shalva retreated.

'The noble Prince Pradyumna then rushed to give battle to Shalva. A grim battle ensued between them. The Prince discharged an arrow of great might. Shalva fell down senseless. All his followers fled away.'

After a little pause, the messenger continued: "After regaining consciousness, Shalva discharged arrows at noble Pradyumna; that noble Prince fell down unconscious, and his charioteer carried him from the battle-field.

'Shalva, seeing his followers running away, lost heart, got into his car, and disappeared in the clouds of dust.

'Then noble Pradyumna, with all the able-bodied Yadavas, retired into the dense jungle.'

'Are the *srotriyas,* women and children safe?' asked Krishna.

The messenger replied: 'They were provided asylum in the citadel of Girinagar, which was well guarded and had ample provisions'.

'Is the venerable King, Ugrasena, safe? And the women of the royal family?'

'They were sent to Bhrigukachha by ships'.

'How is the revered father, noble Vasudeva?' asked Krishna.

The messenger could not give a reply for some time. Then he cleared his throat and haltingly said: "The noble father, Vasudeva, had been kidnapped by Shalva and carried away to Saubha".

'Noble father! .... to lay hands on his sacred person!' said Krishna and lapsed into stern silence.

Krishna took the invasion of Saurashtra as a challenge to him as the guardian of *dharma* and gave instructions to the Yadava contingent to prepare for their return journey to Dwaraka.

When the contingent was ready to start, Krishna took leave of Mother Kunti, the Five Brothers, Draupadi and other members of the family.

Yudhishthira requested Krishna to take Arjuna, Nakula, or Sahadeva with him. Krishna shook his head. 'Eldest, I knew that Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula or Sahadeva would be most helpful to me. However, the enemy, Shalva, knows every inch of the land and so do we, Uddhava, Saatyaki, and myself, but strangers would be lost in the desert'.

'The situation has entirely changed', continued Krishna. 'It is not merely a raid on Saurashtra, nor is it a matter of only rescuing venerable Father. It is a challenge to *dharma*. If we do not accept it, we would have undone whatever we have been doing. This is going to be no war of defence, but a total war, I assure you'.

Two days later, Krishna and Saatyaki with their entourage started early in the morning for Saurashtra.

By constant use, the cart-track, skirting the desert from Indraprastha to Saurashtra, had become a regular highway. Villages and *ashrams* had sprung up on both its sides.

When they heard that Krishna Vaasudeva was passing by, the villagers with their womenfolk gathered on the roadsides to offer him ceremonial welcome to receive his blessings —men with coconut and mango-leaves in their hands, women with pots of water on their heads.

Even as he drove the chariot, Krishna felt that life for him had a distinct and compelling mission—to protect the godly and destroy the wicked; to re-establish *dharma* and strengthen *kshaatra-dharma*.

The past rose before him......

....When he was sixteen, his father, Vasudeva, and other leading Yadavas called him to Mathura to challenge the tyrant Kamsa, his maternal uncle. He came, accepted the challenge and killed him in a body combat.

....With this event began a life and death struggle between him and Jarasandha, the powerful King of Magadha and the father-in-law of Kamsa, who wanted to bring all the Arya kings into submission.

....When Kamsa was killed, Jarasandha took a vow to kill him and his brother Balarama and marched on Mathura demanding their surrender. However, they escaped to the inaccessible mountain-top of Gomantaka.

....Jarasandha pursued the two brothers to Gomantaka. Unable to scale its steep slopes, Jarasandha set fire to the grass grown on the slopes so that Balarama and he might be burnt to death. Both of them escaped.

....Some time later, Jarasandha again marched on Mathura, the homeland of the Yadavas. Only two ways were open to us, the Yadavas—either to surrender Balaraama and himself or to face the total destruction of Mathura.

....To escape Jarasandha's murderous fury, he led an exodus of the Yadavas—men, women and children, together with their cattle, horses and bullock-carts and their possessions— to a distant part of Saurashtra on the sea-shore and founded Dwaraka. He also converted Mount Girinagar into an impregnable citadel.

....Rukmini, the daughter of King Bhishmaka of Vidarbha, eloped with him and married him. Jarasandha, though present at her *Swayamvara,* realised that he could do nothing in the Assembly of Kings as most of them were hostile to him. Rukmi, brother of Rukmini, pursued Krishna to bring back his sister, but did not succeed in the attempt.

....At the *Swayamvara* of Draupadi, he forced Jarasandha to withdraw from it ignominiously. She was married to the Five Brothers, thus forging a matrimonial alliance between them and King Drupad of Panchala.

....It was then that Yudhishthira decided to perform the Rajasuya to celebrate his hegemony over the Arya kings. But Jarasandha was the most formidable hurdle.

....When he was called to Mathura by his father and uncle, it had enemies on all directions—Jarasandha in the east, Shishupal in the south, Shalva across the desert in the west and Duryodhana's father-in-law Sabal, in the north.

....If all of them had combined against the Aryas, there would have been no chance of surviving.

....Before Yudhishthira decided to perform the Rajasuya to celebrate his hegemony over the Arya Kings, it was essential that the hostile neighbours should be removed. He therefore advised Yudhishthira to eliminate Jarasandha in a body combat.

.... Jarasandha was fond of body combat. Body combat had been an essential part of *kshaatra-dharma*. It was not merely an exercise in athletics, but was a substitute for war and the code of honour had been prescribed in the *kshaatra-dharma*.

....He, along with Bhima and Arjuna, went to Girivraja and Bhima killed Jarasandha in a body combat.

....At the Rajasuya, Shishupal of Chedi, one of the allies of Jarasandha was also killed by him and the hostility came to a head.

....The Rajasuya ended, though the bitterness between the Rajanyas who sided with him and those who were against him grew.

CHAPTER 3

THE NEW SHAPE OF DWARAKA

ON leaving Indraprastha for Dwaraka, Krishna sent messengers to all friendly powers to join him in fighting Shalva.

The WORD had gone forth. The destruction of Shalva was ordained by *Dharma*.

Krishna now wore the crown *Dharma-Gopta*. The message of Sri Krishna declaring a holy war against Shalva had been answered. For the first time, Arya youth was united in arms. It was marching in the full flush of its young strength pledged to their battle cry of *dharma*—"यतो धर्मस्ततो जय: Where there is Dharma, there is Victory."

The pounding hooves of chariot-horses were heard. Great Rajanyas in all the pomp and pageantry, shabby Rajanyas each followed by a ragged handful of retainers, and *srotriyas* went about and brought the tidings to outlying villages.

Women were there too. Simple peasant women, worn and weary with their toil-ridden lives, tramped sturdily behind their men who had answered Krishna's summons. From every corner of Aryavarta they came.

Krishna's miraculous achievements in killing the dread Kamsa, Shishupal and Jarasandha had created a great upheaval of creative vitality, like a tidal wave, sending its swell to end in ripples in the unbroken forests.

Many Rajanyas, though pledged to *kshaatra-dharma*, could not **defend** the *ashrams* within their own **territory.** They cared for their own existence first and were glad that someone like Krishna, who had no ambition to establish an empire of his own, was there to protect them.

Even Krishna at first did not envisage the full implications of the *Agrapuja* that was offered to him in the Hall of Sacrifice. In fact, no one could guess what Muni Dvaipaayana's intentions were, and as the Venerable Muni moved towards him, there was profound silence in the Hall.

The Muni, for years, had given strength to the *ashrams* and consolidated the Aryas. The *Sruti,* the divine *Vedas,* had become their living divinity. The *ashrams,* by and large, had maintained the code of strict self-discipline—*tapas*—which the Muni had imposed on the *srotriyas.*

The *Vedas,* a living divinity, so thought the Muni, were as broad as the three worlds; life, however, was as narrow as the individual. To broaden the individual outlook, it was necessary that the Sacred Fire accompanied by appropriate *mantra*s should be worshipped.

The *ashrams* soon came to radiate moral and spiritual influence, where the inmates invoked the God of Fire and chanted the Vedic *mantras.* They also tamed the ferocity of Rajanyas by converting them into instruments of peace.

From time to time, the Rakshasas also emerged from the forests to destroy the ashrams, foul the Sacred Fire and tear off the *yagnopaveet* of the *srotriyas.*

The events which happened at the Rajasuya created a wave of enthusiasm in every *ashram.* Whoever heard about Krishna's exploits was awestruck; in fact, his achievements themselves came to be worshipped as divinities.

When *Agrapuja* was accorded to Krishna unexpectedly, even he felt the burden of far-reaching responsibilities. *Dharma-gopta,* the guardian of dharma, was more than a Chakravarti.

His empire of *dharma* which had come to him was invisible but he felt he was more powerful because it was founded on willing hearts not merely of Yadavas, but all Aryas, Nagas, the Rakshasas and even the Nishadas.

* * *

It was a ghastly scene which met Krishna's eyes on his return to Dwaraka. Houses had been burnt down; charred remains of men, cattle and horses lay everywhere.

Taking advantage of the absence of Krishna and the leading *maharathis,* Shalva, King of Saubha, had descended upon Dwaraka, with fire and sword. After destroying it, he had returned to his homeland.

Krishna blew his conch, announcing his arrival. So did the other *maharathis,* to challenge the enemy. However, there was no enemy left to take up the challenge.

At the news of Krishna's arrival, the Yadavas who had valiantly tried to defend Dwaraka but were forced to take refuge in the dense forest, came out. Some of them ran back to the forest and fetched Pradyumna, a son of Krishna, who arrived with some warriors, and prostrated themselves before his father, Krishna.

The contingent camped along the sea-shore and began setting up huts and all that was necessary for the refugees.

After Krishna and the *maharathis* had their food, Pradyumna described how Shalva, leading his camel-warriors, crossed the river Lavanika and overran the whole of Saurashtra.

'Our warriors bravely resisted Shalva's forces', continued Pradyumna. 'Uncle Uddhava immediately sent two *maharathis* to bring you back to Dwaraka. He also arranged for the wounded to be removed to the citadel. All the able-bodied Yadava chiefs and their followers hid themselves in the jungle harassing Shalva's men'.

'Some Yadavas went in advance to reconnoitre', continued Pradyumna. 'While they were crossing the river Lavanika, a group of Saubha warriors captured them. Among them was venerable grandfather Vasudeva'.

'Why did you allow Father to be taken away?' queried Krishna.

'We tried to follow the way they had taken', added Pradyumna. 'However it was not possible for us to pursue Saubha warriors'.

'We did our best', continued Pradyumna. 'However, without camels, we could not follow them further in the desert.'

'Don't worry, if Father was still alive, a few days' delay will not matter. If he were killed by Shalva, he will have to pay a terrible price for it', said Krishna.

'What about Saatyaki?' asked Krishna.

'Uncle Saatyaki went back to warn you of the dangers to which you would be exposed on the way', replied Pradyumna. 'Five days have elapsed since Uncle left and we have no news about him. Perhaps he has also been captured by Shalva'.

For a moment, he pondered over the situation and said: 'It is difficult to resist Shalva when he invades our lands. Now we will have to fight him on his own ground protected as it is by the river Lavanika and the long stretch of desert beyond. We can't destroy Shalva by running away from him. We shall have to deal with him in the way he deserves. Are there any Saubha warriors left in Saurashtra?'

'I do not think that you will find a single Saubha warrior operating to the south of Lavanika', said Pradyumna.

'How many Yadavas have been left in Saurashtra?' asked Krishna.

'There are many. They have been bringing back their horses and cattle—whatever is left of them. Just now they are living on fruits and roots, which, by the grace of Goddess Annapoorna, are in plenty', said Pradyumna.

'Now that you are here, I may go in search of noble Grandfather Vasudeva', continued Pradyumna.

'Don't be hasty or impetuous', said Krishna.

'You need not worry about my impetuosity, Father. You always call me hasty and end by accepting whatever I did', said Pradyumna with a laugh, his eyes reflecting the love and respect in which he held his father.

'That is why the women love you so much', said Krishna slapping on his cheek. 'Your mind runs a hundred *yojanas* ahead of ours,' Krishna smiled mischievously.

It was a heart-breaking task to remove the debris collected where once Dwaraka's mansions stood.

There was need for hundreds of hutments but building material was scarce.

The clamour for food was piteous. They did not even have one quarter of what was needed. Babies were crying for milk but there was no milk available.

There were horses but not one under control; without ropes, they were roaming about as they liked.

Women, young and old, sat in distress, crying and sniffing with their hands on their heads in despair. The loss of a father or a husband or a brother or a son weighed heavily upon them.

Shalva's raiding contingent had set fire to the houses but could not stay long because there was not enough food required to feed their camels.

Krishna became the life and soul of the activity with his heartening talk and winning smile. His presence radiated good cheer. His enthusiasm was infectious.

'What about the shrine of Lord Somanath?' asked Krishna.

'The raiders have destroyed it,' replied Pradyumna.

'We shall raise a new temple in silver,' said Krishna.

Dwaraka rose to a new shape.

CHAPTER 4

MAYAVATI

PRADYUMNA was twenty years of age. He was an anachronism. He alone knew his deep love and fellowship for the Yadavas. He had been a good leader, a fearless defender of *dharma*. He was loved as no other young Arya was.

During the last five years when he returned to Dwaraka, he had received intensive training in *kshaatra-dharma* under Krishna's supervision. To him it had been an unending struggle between the gods and demons. Everything that he was taught, had been directed towards making him a stout-hearted champion of *dharma*. His ardent nature and chivalrous instinct had made him ready to receive this training. He knew that, but for such intensive training, he would never be able to come up to the standard.

Pradyumna was full of enthusiasm. So far, he had performed deeds of valour only under the protective shadow of his father, Krishna, who, however, gave him the credit. In fact, Pradyumna could never have performed the deeds without the inspiration and help of his father.

Young Pradyumna never resented the rude behaviour of Purna, the *mull,* for he was placed in charge of Pradyumna when he returned to Dwaraka and a deep love subsisted between these two.

His mother, Rukmini, the proud Princess of Vidarbha, had fed him with the heroic deeds of the Arya heroes. She had encouraged him in his ambition to be the guardian of *kshaatra-dharma*.

Then came this unfortunate event. Pradyumna was stolen by Shambar. Months passed by and years too, but no trace of the boy or the thief could be found. Rukmini became heart-broken.

Once in a skirmish, he destroyed Shambar and brought his wife Mayavati to Dwaraka and married her though she was ten years older than him, and was more like a mother than a wife. Many Yadavas were ashamed of this lapse.

Rukmini, his mother, however, could never forgive him for this fall from *kshaatra-dharma*. She would not receive Mayavati, nor even Pradyumna. Whenever she met him, she turned away in disgust.

In spite of every effort made by Pradyumna, the attitude of his mother did not change. Krishna did not agree with Rukmini. The boy was there, very affectionate by nature, handsome as the God of Love and joviai too.

When they were alone, Krishna asked Pradyumna: 'Where is Mayavati? Is she with the other ladies of the royal family, taken to the Bhrigukachha or Girinagar? What is all this mystery about her?'

'You would never be able to find her', replied Pradyumna.

'Where is she then?' asked Krishna.

'She preferred to stay in the forest', replied Pradyumna.

'What is she doing in the forest?'

'She is holding herself in readiness to go with me to Shalva', said Pradyumna.

'Your choice of a wife was so unfortunate', said Krishna and added: 'Have you discussed your visit to Shalva with her?'

'She looks upon it as an act of expiation', replied Pradyumna.

'Are you so sure that she is still in the forest?' enquired Krishna.

'Yes. I have been living with her for fifteen years'.

'Why did she not go and live with the other ladies of the family?' asked Krishna.

'Father, very often I have conveyed to you that you should adopt her as the daughter-in-law of noble Vaidehi. Better meet her. I cannot convey the significance of her attitude as much as she herself could', said Pradyumna.

'Can I meet her?' asked Krishna.

'You are the only person whom she may not object meeting, besides uncle Uddhava, of course, whom she considers as her father', replied Pradyumna.

Though Pradyumna did not like his father risking Mayavati's temper, he took him to her. They went through the forest on almost obscure trails and came to a hollow where Mayavati was preparing food.

When they met Mayavati, Krishna asked her: 'Why did you not go to Girinagar with the other ladies of the family?'

Mayavati replied: 'Do you expect me to be with those proud ladies of your family? They have not accepted me and I do not accept them'.

'But why did you not go?' Krishna repeated the question.

'My plans are already made', she said with a look of contempt. 'I plan my own life the way I like'.

'But how can you go with Pradyumna? He is going alone to face the most formidable enemy of the Aryas, Shalva. It will be dangerous to accompany him to Shalva's headquarters', said Krishna.

'It is no use discussing the matter. I have given my reply to Pradyumna the first day the question arose about his going to meet Shalva', said Mayavati.

'But how can you go with him? You would be an encumbrance to him when he proposes to go to Shalva', interrupted Krishna.

'Encumbrance! But for me where would he have been? He was about five years old when he was stolen. He did not know where he came from and who his parents were. I was his mother, father, brother and sister. But there was something more than the affection of relatives between us.

'We were part of each other and but for me he would never have been alive. He looked upon me as a mother'.

After a little pause, she continued: 'One night when the barbarians had gone out on their expedition, we went to sleep as usual. However, I woke up in the middle of the night. I was perturbed at the mood in which I was. I realised that Pradyumna was no longer a child, but a young man craving for partnership in life.

'I was becoming a strange person. I was half-awake. He put his hands on me softly, perhaps in sleep. However, I closed my eyes in ecstasy. Pradyumna was also transformed. He was trembling with excitement. Since that moment, we became partners in life.

'We had no feast to celebrate our wedding, no *srotriyas* to bless us. I lighted the fire and both of us went round the sacred Fire seven times and the Gods made us one. Next day, my eyes were awakened at the risk we had taken.

'You do not know the part played by Pradyumna in my life since then. I decided that I shall not leave Pradyumna at the mercy of the barbarians. I saw that he was not only my partner, but my love, my heart, my salvation. Everyday I was walking on the edge of the sword. Then I came across uncle Uddhava. Uncle Uddhava has given us a small house to live in the extreme limit and a small entourage to protect us in case of danger.'

Mayavati continued: 'You have made him a front rank *maharathi*. He is very affectionate. I brought him to you because you can strengthen his dignity by according him the prestige and power which goes among the Rajanyas. I would also like him to go and achieve great deeds. He is impatient to do them.

'My life is bound up with Pradyumna's. Why are you asking me to repeat what I have told you again and again? Wherever he goes, I go with him. If he stays here, I will also stay with him. If he is killed by Shalva, as you fear, I shall jump into his funeral pyre. I like to tell all this to you because you are the only person, other than uncle Uddhava, who could see how beautiful our life has been'.

CHAPTER 5

THROUGH THE DESERT

KRISHNA would like to have Pradyumna by his side, particularly when he was likely to be captured by Shalva. His own presence in Dwaraka, however, was of prime importance.

Pradyumna said: 'As I told you, father, Shalva fled away when I was on the eve of killing him. He boarded his Viman Saubha and left the field of battle. *Kshaatra-dharma* required that I should not fight a foe who is no longer able to resist.'

Then he added mischievously: 'Besides, you have been saving the Yadavas single-handed a number of times and now it is my turn to put an end to this danger once for all.'

Krishna smiled indulgently. 'Well you might. It is noble of you to undertake this task and my blessings are with you.' Then he laughed and said: 'Come back soon, my son. But don't bring an elderly woman as your wife. Your mother is very particular about it and a married man should never forget the welfare of his mother. And at all times, uphold *kshaatra-dharma.'*

'I will try to do so, father,' replied Pradyumna.

Krishna continued: 'I could have restrained you from undertaking this hazardous enterprise but I also know that you would be happier if you perform individual deeds of valour by yourself.

* * *

Pradyumna and his two companions crossed the river Lavanya and entered the desert. They came across an oasis where he and his companions rested, where water was ample and a few trees provided protection against the blazing sun.

There were signs of a large contingent of camel-riders having rested there some months before.

When Pradyumna saw the oasis, there was no doubt in his mind that if he proceeded straight, he would be on the right track to reach Shalva's quarters.

Pradyumna and his companions spent the night at the oasis. Early next morning, after performing the morning rituals and having taken the food that they brought with them, they proceeded further.

Walking in the sands was a torture when the sun became increasingly hot. They halted at a tiny village of about ten huts. Several camels and about a hundred goats were grazing by. There was also a deep well with a trough for the use of camels and cattle.

Two men came out of the huts, one of them carrying a bow and arrows. They put their hands on their ears and shook their heads, indicating that they did not understand what Pradyumna said.

While they were trying to understand each other, another warrior came out of the hut fully armed with spear, sword, shield, a bow and arrows, evidently a Chief. He came near Pradyumna and by a gesture asked him to go away. Pradyumna told him in the language of Saubha which he knew a little, that he had come on behalf of Krishna Vaasudeva, the Guardian of *Dharma*, defender of righteousness, to meet the all-powerful King of Kings—that was the way Shalva was styled.

When Pradyumna told the warriors that he would like to meet the mighty ruler to deliver the message of Sri Krishna, the Chief laughed aloud as if it was a joke and by gestures indicated that the visitors had got to stay in the village; if they tried to leave it, they would be killed.

He took away the weapons of Pradyumna and of his attendants. He then turned to the camels on which Pradyumna and his companions had travelled. He mounted on one of them and led the others.

Pradyumna looked at the camel warriors, who were evidently high ranking warriors of Shalva.

'Why have you come here?' asked the Chief.

'I came to greet your mighty King of Kings, of whom I have heard so much,' replied Pradyumna.

The Chief asked: 'What is your name?'

Pradyumna replied: 'Take me to the mighty King Shalva. I will then tell him who I am. As I told you, my orders are to go and meet him.'

'What rank do you hold among your warriors?'

'I am a *maharathi* and if King shalva had not invaded Saurashtra, I might have acquired the status of an *atirathi* at the next races,' said Pradyumna.

'I am going today and will return here the day after. They are our guests', said the Chief. 'Now that we have taken away all their food stocked on their camels, we should also provide them with a part of it.'

They rode for two days through the desert resting only when they came across an oasis.

On the third day, in the evening, they came to a big oasis where they rested for the night.

On the fourth day, when they started, some camel warriors were seen approaching them; all except their leader, had only bows and arrows. When they came near, they halted the camels and climbed down.

Despite his consistent courtesy and concern for the captives' comfort, the Chief refused to tell him the destination.

On the fifth day, when they halted at a large oasis, they were received by fully armed chiefs.

Under the Chief's instructions, two warriors brought fresh clothes for Pradyumna to wear and called upon him to surrender his clothes. For a moment, Pradyumna tried to think of their strategy.

'Don't suspect any trick. You are going to see the Great one, King of Kings, and you cannot see him with your clothes soiled and unclean,' said the Chief.

On the the sixth day, as the dawn broke, they rode into a town with houses of high-ranking warriors on both sides of the road. Streets were littered with refuse; naked children went about playing in the dust. As they crossed the streets, it struck Pradyumna that this was a camel economy; for some camels were tied to the poor-posts; some of them were being milked. There were also goats, sheeps, and mules. But there was no trace of cattle or horses.

The Chief took Pradyumna and his companions to a camp where they were given sumptuous food.

When they started on their journey again, the streets were full of distinguished persons going about.

Pradyumna tried to talk to one of the passers by. The Chief pulled his hand and said: 'You and your companions are my prisoners.'

'We are not prisoners. Prisoners are those who are taken only in a fight and we have not yet fought,' said Pradyumna.

'I agree with you; fighting is a folly when nothing could be gained by it,' said the Chief with a laugh. 'The great King of Kings has given me specific commands that not a hair of your head should be harmed. I have come to take care of you,' continued the Chief.

'What about my companions?' asked Pradyumna.

'Oh! They would also be our guests. Come on, let us ride for we have many *yojanas* to cover,' said the Chief.

They rode during the small hours before sun rise and then during the heat of the day, they took rest at a caravanserai or an oasis.

Pradyumna could not understand the strange behaviour of the Saubhas. Wherever they stopped, by prior arrangement, food and other amenities were offered to him as if he was a Prince.

The Chief halted at the principal gate of a mud fort. 'We have arrived at Matrikovata, our destination. This is the end of our journey.' After a little pause, the Chief continued: 'If you want to know my name, now, I am Vajranabh, the Head of the Saubha army. Do you want to know your name? You are Pradyumna, son of Krishna Vaasudeva.'

Both of them laughed loudly at the trick which they had been playing with each other.

CHAPTER 6

FACE TO FACE

WHEN they entered Matrikovata, Pradyumna marvelled at the size of the huge sprawling house with goat-skin walls. They were escorted to a chamber, which was luxuriously furnished. Whichever way they moved, the servitors showed them great courtesy.

That night Pradyumna and his entourage were allotted a separate room within the hospitable walls of the community house.

Pradyumna felt as if he was being treated like a well-fed hog. The object of this princely treatment can only be to corrupt him by excessive attention.

Pradyumna and his companions were taken to a chamber, in which there was a rectangular bathing pool. Since no one came near, they took their clothes off and swam in the pool.

A corpulent dark-hued servitor appeared as though by magic, bowed low and slapped his fat hands. Half-a-dozen girl servitors came into the chamber at his summons. Pradyumna dived back into the pool and the girls, giggling at him, went back disgusted.

The servitors brought them food and drink which Pradyumna and his companions partook. Then they stretched themselves on the couches provided for them and soon fell asleep.

Before parting for the night, Pradyumna asked Vajranabh: 'Do all your servitors—men and women—provide all amenities of life?'

The spirit of self-denial, which was inculcated in him, was shocked at the women servitors, almost bare-bodied, bringing them food.

There were few households where they did not swarm.

'*Kshaatra-dharma* condemns dependence on slaves', said Pradyumna and continued: 'Does no one obey the canons of *kshaatra-dharma*—not even the high-born women?'

Vajranabh said with a cynical laugh: 'It is scarce to find a woman who is chaste.' He laid a big hand on his companion's forearm and said: 'I told you before that you would not find much to your liking here. Don't be shocked. Our women do not like to be condemned.' Then he lowered his voice. 'People who do not contribute to the strength of the mighty King of Kings have gone in fear of their lives.'

He broke off as he read the face of Pradyumna and continued: 'But take heart, not all are such as these. There are a number of noble and good women, but they dare not condemn others openly'.

'But how can they prevail against men?' asked the young Yadava.

'They have a weapon more powerful than the weapon which we possess', replied Vajranabh.

Pradyumna asked: 'What is the weapon which they possess and we don't?'

Vajranabh smiled and said: 'Poison—when they sleep with their heads in their lap'.

'Don't try to destroy the burning faith and high morale of the young warriors', said Pradyumna.

'Well, keep your faith, young Yadava, treasure it, guard it, but beware of our women', said Vajranabh.

Vajranabh liked the young man, so handsome and so straightforward. He lowered his voice and said: 'You seem to be a dedicated *kshatriya*, my son'.

Seriously perturbed by what Vajranabh had told him, Pradyumna retired to the room where he was to pass that night.

Next morning, dark-hued servitors came to help them wash themselves and do their morning rituals. He was also given a woollen shawl, a present from the King of Kings.

The next day when Pradyumna woke up, he found a dark-hued servitor kneeling behind the head of his couch. Another slave appeared in the doorway, bowed low and said: 'If my lord will follow this unworthy slave, he will be brought to the royal chamber where the mighty King of Kings desired him to be brought'.

It was a blazing afternoon. The mull, Purna, helped Pradyumna to attire himself in a manner befitting a call upon the King of Kings.

Pradyumna told his companions to accompany him to the royal chamber, but the dark-hued slave squirmed in the humility of his obeisance as he said: 'Forgive me, but I was commanded that you alone should be brought'.

'Nothing is going to happen to us, my boy', said Purna, the mull, to Pradyumna. 'If they had intended to do something to us, they would not have brought us across the desert with such honour and respect. There seems to be some mischief afoot. Now I recognise this Chief. I remember to have seen him, where I can't say. We shall shortly solve the riddle of our presence here'.

Pradyumna was escorted by the servitor to the royal chamber where there was a low dais, overspread with tiger skins. Along the back of the dais stood an immobile rank of huge dark-hued servitors with naked swords in their hands.

Seated cross-legged, like all the others on the dais, was a man to whom all eyes would have been drawn even without the pomp and splendour of his present setting. He was in the middle fifties and, even sitting, showed himself to be of great stature.

Pradyumna immediately saw that this was Shalva with whom he had fought in Saurashtra. He stood proud and erect with a faint smile on his face as he discovered that even Shalva realised who he was.

The King of Kings looked at Pradyumna with a smile. Pointing to a seat near him, he said: 'You are welcome to the court of the King of Kings. Come and sit down, young man. Don't be afraid.'

Pradyumna responded by a boyish smile of disbelief. 'King of Kings, if you had asked me, I would have come myself. If you are the King of Kings, as *kshaatra-dharma* requires and *kshatriyas* are expected to do, you should have a ceremonial body combat with me'.

'Now I remember. You are the young warrior whom I would have finished at Dwaraka, but spared', said Shalva. 'I know you well. You fought me bravely in Dwaraka. I have no quarrel with you; it is with your father'.

'Why then have you captured me? Perhaps to enjoy my company?' asked Pradyumna. 'Perhaps there is another version of the incident.'

Shalva laughed cynically. 'We will not fail in our duties as host'.

Then, at his command, a slave girl came in followed by musicians.

'She is a wonderful girl', Shalva said.

She danced languorously, indolently, sensually, casting her gauzy veils from her as she swayed, until she dropped the last as the music ceased, and stood before them, sculptured and modelled as a statue.

Shalva leaned towards Pradyumna and asked: 'Do you find the girl attractive?'

Pradyumna replied: 'Indeed, she is beautiful'.

Shalva said: 'I give her gladly to you. She is most docile and obedient and well schooled in her art'.

'I thank the noble King of Kings for his magnificent gift, but the gift is useless for me. I have vowed not to touch a woman unless she was married to me. That is one of the pledges I took when I was initiated into *kshaatra-dharma*', said Pradyumna.

With a nod of his head, Shalva waved his hand, and the slave girl gathered up her gauzy scarves she had shed and backed out followed by her musicians.

CHAPTER 7

THE MUGG FORT

SHALVA was in a great difficulty. Since his return from Saurashtra, Shalva had tried to create, by speech and demeanour, the impression among his people that he had returned from Dwaraka with flying colours.

In fact, he was in a very depressed mood. In the battle of Dwaraka, he had lost three of his trusted lieutenants—Vegavan, most loyal and competent among them; Vivindha, a very influential Danava warrior; and Kshemavriddhi, his minister.

He himself had to leave the field of battle, not only without achieving victory, but in a humiliating situation as he had to retreat hastily.

Vegavan was in charge of all his forces. Next in succession to him was his son, Vajranabh, who had been placed in command of Shalva's forces or whatever of them were now left. Shalva had little confidence in Vajranabh, but there was nothing to show that he was incompetent or disloyal. He started no intrigue nor did he participate in any.

Shalva asked Vajranabh to come near him. He came near and offered customary salutations to Shalva.

'Vajranabh, I now place all my powers in your hands. You are as dear to me as was your father, Vegavan', said Shalva.

'Your commands shall be obeyed, lord', replied Vajranabh.

'That is why I have entrusted the forces to you. We have our enemies and we should deal with them in the manner they deserve', said Shalva.

After a little while, Shalva added: 'You have to play host to Pradyumna. Mugg fort is placed at your disposal. I have already given instructions for shifting your family there'.

Vajranabh saluted Shalva. 'As Your Majesty commands'.

'Feed him well. Offer him the best girl available', said Shalva.

Shalva clapped his hands twice and shouted: 'Come here, Abbaya'.

Two of the warriors sitting next to Abbaya got hold of him and brought him to the King of Kings. His turban and the sword were taken away from him and his hands were tied behind him.

Shalva's face became grim. He snarled: 'I will not tolerate anyone who is disloyal to me. You know that'.

The captive nodded his head in submission.

'And yet you talked about the royal forts to your friends'.

Abbaya was terrified; his knees collapsed under him. Shalva's face underwent a complete change. Now he looked like an angry tiger.

'Come here. Bend your neck', he roared.

Abbaya could hardly drag himself near the King. Shalva, by a swift movement of his arm, brought his naked sword on the neck of Abbaya. His head, severed from his body, spurted torrents of blood.

Shalva turned triumphantly to Pradyumna. 'Am I not a just King? I know how to deal with people disloyal to me. Remember Vajranabh, this is why the King of Kings is called just. Favours to the loyal, death to the disloyal'.

Shalva rose from his seat and so did everyone. He waved his sword and showed it to the warriors present there. The hall looked as if a great victory had been achieved.

'You can go now, Vajranabh', said Shalva and then turning to Pradyumna, he said: 'You, our distinguished guest, will also go with him. He and his family will look after you better than anyone else. Isn't it so, Vajranabh?'

'As Your Majesty commands', replied Vajranabh.

'How long will I have the privilege of being your guest?' asked Pradyumna.

'Till hospitality becomes so meagre that our guest is anxious to leave us', said Shalva, with loud laughter. In response, Pradyumna flashed one of his inimitable smiles.

Pradyumna was taken by Vajranabh to his chamber where in company of the guests, they took their food. 'We can take Purna, the mull, with us and others can wait here in the rooms which have been reserved for me in this royal camp', said Vajranabh.

Pradyumna felt that the time had come when he must decide to win without the use of weapons. 'I leave my life in your hands, valiant Vajranabh', he said.

On the third day at dawn, the party started for the Mugg fort.

Vajranabh invited Pradyumna to ride with him on the same camel. 'Come and ride with me', said Vajranabh.

Soon they were riding towards one of the three hill forts which came up on the horizon.

'Why are we travelling towards them?' asked Pradyumna.

'We are pledged not to talk about the forts to anyone. You know why Abbaya was punished. He talked about the forts with another Saubha warrior. If anybody talks, he attracts extreme punishment'.

However, Vajranabh thought that the young Yadava was seeing the hill forts for the last time, so there was no harm in telling what the forts were for.

'This one in the middle is the residence of the King of Kings and his family. It is always being guarded by trusted and seasoned warriors. No one can enter it unless the King of Kings permits him to do so'.

After a little pause he continued: This one to the left is the Mugg, fort. It was occupied by my father when he was the chief of the Army. In the third fort, so very closely guarded, persons convicted of treason awaiting death are housed in. But you do not want me to lose my head by giving you the information about the forts. Abbaya's death was a warning to me that I will share the same fate if I let you escape from the Mugg fort'.

'Would you be subjected to the same penalty if you let me know something about the Mugg fort?' Pradyumna continued: 'Why is such importance given to me, I do not understand?'

Vajranabh interrupted in a low voice: 'You can see the gates of the fort. How heavily guarded they are! It may be a precaution against your getting away from it.'

Vajranabh lapsed into silence. Pradyumna could clearly see that Vajranabh was unhappy at his being placed under his charge.

When they came near the gate of the Mugg fort, ten guards armed with sword, shield, and spear came and saluted Vajranabh.

As they entered the courtyard, they could hear the laughter of young women who were looking out from the terrace. Vajranabh, by gestures, asked his daughters to come and meet the new guest. The young women came down to greet Vajranabh and Pradyumna. They had never seen a Yadava at close quarters nor seen such a beautiful face as Pradyumna's.

Then Vajranabh took him to another part of the fort, a well-guarded hut which had been set apart for guests.

CHAPTER 8

THE PRISON OF ROSE BUDS

PRADYUMNA'S life in Mugg fort was filled with constant joy, which was also a ceaseless agony.

He saw that, whatever be the guise, Shalva had kept him in a prison of rose buds. However attractive, it was a prison. He saw that even Vajranabh's family could not conceal their unhappiness at being left with him in a solitary fort.

The eldest daughter, Prabhavati, about 16, with her voluptuous, generous curves, was aggressive in her approach to Pradyumna. Evidently, she had decided to capture him as a husband.

To be alone with Prabhavati was partly ecstasy and partly torture. In her company, he forgot the purpose for which he had come here and the fate of his grandfather.

Her two younger sisters—one of 8 and another of 5—appeared to be tutored not to encumber Prabhavati's relations with Pradyumna by their presence and left them alone whenever possible.

One late afternoon, a message was brought that Vajranabh would not return to the Mugg Fort that night.

His infatuation had grown until there were times when he avoided being alone with Prabhavati.

After the evening meal, the younger sisters of Prabhavati left them alone.

The two slave girl servitors waiting there also disappeared when Prabhavati waved her hands to indicate her wishes to be left alone.

At first they did not know what to talk. Then Prabhavati broke the silence: 'You do not like my company. Why do you look so miserable these days? Why are you so silent?'

'Because I do not know what to talk,' replied Pradyumna.

'I am trying to tell you what I want to say. But if I tell you, the King of Kings would be very angry,' said Prabhavati.

'I see that you are all afraid of some impending danger,' said Pradyumna.

'But I want to know what troubles you? Why are you so depressed these days?' she insisted with a smile.

'It is the same thing which keeps all of you in a tragic mood,' replied Pradyumna.

Prabhavati broke down. 'It is no use telling you everything. Whichever way I turn, I have to face calamity.' Tears welled up in her eyes. 'We are used like pawns in the game of the King of Kings.'

'What is the game?' asked Pradyumna. 'I do not understand it.'

'You are treated here as the royal guest,' said Prabhavati. 'What more do you want?'

'It is a joke. I am treated here as a royal guest but I have no freedom to go out. I could have understood if your King of Kings had killed me straightaway.'

'When are you going to leave us?' asked Prabhavati.

'That is what I want to know. You all have treated me as if I was a member of your family, and I see how assiduously you have cultivated my goodwill,' said Pradyumna.

'What can we do to keep you here?' asked Prabhavati.

'Nothing more,' said Pradyumna with a sigh. 'The very idea of parting with such affectionate people as you are, causes me agony.'

'Then, why not stay with us? My father and mother will be happy if you decide to stay here,' said Prabhavati.

'How can I?' said Pradyumna holding up his hands. 'I cannot be here all my life. If I marry you and settle down comfortably in Matrikovata, I would have broken the promise I gave to my father.'

After a little pause he continued: 'Why, all the Yadavas would disown me—and rightly too! Moreover, Mayavati, my 'mother', would feel her life's work betrayed and her ambition to see me as a flaming sword of *kshaatra-dharma* would have been frustrated. I feel very miserable.'

'Every mother feels a pang when her children leave them,' said Prabhavati.

'I could see that your family is overcast with impending disaster. I am also sure that the danger is connected with my future. But no one in the family talks about it in my presence. Perhaps, your father, valiant Vajranabh, knows what is going to happen to me, but he is reticent about it.'

'How can you walk out of Mugg Fort without the permission of the King of Kings?' asked Prabhavati.

'That is what I want to know. The object of my coming here has to be achieved. If not, I cannot go back to Dwaraka. But I am treated by all of you as if I have come to stay here for the rest of my life.'

'Oh, I would be so happy if you stayed here,' said Prabhavati.

'But I can't live here. I would sooner die rather than forget my mission. I must find out what has happened to my Grandfather, noble Vasudeva. If he is still alive as Shalva's prisoner, I must take steps to get him released. But I am a prisoner myself confined within the four walls of the Mugg Fort.'

After a pause he continued: 'You do not realise what it would be if I fail in my mission. What a blot it would be on the fair name of the Yadavas of Dwaraka!'

'But Dwaraka has been burnt down,' Prabhavati said.

'Yes. But you should now see what tremendous energy my father has infused in them. I have not only to save my skin, but ascertain the fate of my Grandfather at Shalva's hands.'

'Oh, he must have been killed long ago,' said Prabhavati.

'Can you tell me how the King of Kings has dealt with my Grandfather? Is he alive or dead? If he is dead, how did he meet his death,' asked Pradyumna.

'My father's life is also in danger. The King of Kings has sent you here to find some justification for disposing him off. The King of Kings has no love for my father; nor for you. You are kept here as a kind of hostage.'

'Hostage of what?' asked Pradyumna.

'Father expects that I would marry you so that you may settle down amongst us for life. If you stay with us here, he will have hold over the Yadavas. If you escape, the King of Kings will kill us all.'

'I am living in comfort here. If my Grandfather is dead, then I must offer obsequial offerings to the God of Death. If he is alive, then I must rescue him,' said Pradyumna.

With tearful eyes Prabhavati looked at Pradyumna for some time. 'Why don't you talk to father?' she asked. 'He is very kind, loves us all. I think father and mother both would be very happy if I married you.'

'Is it for that they treat me so well? Possibly the King of Kings thinks that if I marry you, I will settle down here. Even if I marry you and hold you dearer than my wife, I cannot forfeit the love and affection which my father has for me,' said Pradyumna.

'I know a cloud of uncertainty hangs over every one here. I equally know that you have come into my life, but there is a grim future before us. There could be no alliance between a Yadava and a Danava.'

'Why do you think that the King of Kings is so cruel?' asked Prabhavati.

'Cruel is not the word. For years and years, he has been attempting to annihilate the Yadavas of Mathura. He had vowed to destroy my father and the whole tribe of Yadavas—to make the earth *"Niryaadavi"*, unencumbered by a single Yadava.'

Prabhavati never realised the deep chasm which separated him from her. She looked at him with tearful eyes.

Pradyumna placed one of his hands on his forehead betraying intense feeling. Prabhavati's hand crept near the other hand of Pradyumna. Without realising what they were doing, they held their hands for some time.

'Don't worry. I will take an early opportunity to talk over this matter with my father. He will perhaps find a solution,' said Prabhavati.

'He loves me much that he would feel very happy if I married you,' continued Prabhavati.

'Perhaps he does not know what that would mean. The King of Kings would call it betrayal on your father's part,' said Pradyumna.

'Let us keep tomorrow's worries for tomorrow. Get up. Don't lose heart.' She caught hold of Pradyumna's hands and pulled him up.

Both of them came close to each other, chest to chest.

'Often at night, I have felt the need of feminine companionship, but I refused the repeated advances of the slave girls. I have prayed to Kamadeva, the God of Love, that the great love for you, might go out of me. But at the same time, I know that could never be,' said Pradyumna.

'Don't feel unhappy,' said Prabhavati. 'Tonight is ours. Come with me. There will be both thunder and lightning tonight.'

CHAPTER 9

THE MANDATE

BOTH Prabhavati and Pradyumna realised the dangerous possibilities of their being together.

Prabhavati whispered: 'You go to your hut. I will follow a little later. Then we can talk in your hut.'

Pradyumna failed to understand the significance of the events that were happening. If he were seen by any servitor moving about the house, he would be killed on the spot. But to disregard Prabhavati's request would break his heart.

Pradyumna went to his hut and impatiently waited for her. He felt that the step taken by her affected him no less than her; otherwise she could not have taken the step to make an appointment with a stranger at night.

It was a little after midnight that he saw Prabhavati coming towards his hut. When she came near him, he could feel that she was excited.

'How did you manage to come out of the house at this time of the night?' Pradyumna asked.

'I wanted to meet you some time to tell you how wonderful you are,' she chuckled. 'But this time I came to you in obedience to the will of the King of Kings.'

'You came because of the King of Kings!' Pradyumna said in surprise. 'Strange things happen in your world.'

'We have nothing but strange things here. I shall know them tomorrow, but for the moment let us think about the mandate,' said Prabhavati.

'What is the mandate? Who dares to issue it?' asked Pradyumna.

'Within fifteen days you should be married to me,' said Prabhavati looking shyly at him. 'These mandates are wonderful things. You will be severely punished by the King of Kings if you do not obey it.'

Pradyumna asked with a smile: 'Did your father agree to it?'

'What else could he do? All that he has to say is: "As Your Majesty commands" and submit. That is the only response permissible and father must have given it.'

'Did he mention that I should be assassinated?' asked Pradyumna.

'No. On the contrary he admires you. At least that he told father the day before,' Prabhavati replied.

'Danava women poison their lovers when they sleep with their head on their laps,' said Prabhavati.

'Oh, how dreadful it is,' exclaimed Pradyumna. 'Time is very short. However I welcome dangers. I love to face them with a smile. Left to ourselves we would have slept in each other's arms, but I know that nothing happens here without the King of Kings' approval.'

'If I want to live for more than fifteen days...,' she looked hopefully at Pradyumna and said '...would you accept me in marriage?'

'Of course, I will. But it is difficult to become cheerful over it,' said Pradyumna.

'The marriage that I had looked forward to has been over-shadowed by compulsion. But there is no help,' said Prabhavati.

'One thing I can infer from the mandate is that the King of Kings wants me to stay here with you for ever,' continued Prabhavati.

'Oh, please find some way. I am so heart-broken. Since

I saw you, I have been looking forward to our marriage celebrated with song, dance and beat of the drums. You must find a way out of this ugly situation. Can we run away?' asked Pradyumna with a humorous smile.

'We can, but the next day father and all the members of my family will be killed,' replied Prabhavati.

'If I don't marry you, I too will be killed. And I do not know what fate will be yours.'

'When mother received the message from my father, she told me what it was, and that we have to obey it. I wonder whether the King of Kings will punish my father if he fails to get you married to me,' replied Prabhavati.

'This step of the King of Kings implies a change in his strategy against the Yadavas,' said Pradyumna. 'He wants me to turn a traitor to my father and infect all the Yadavas with poison.' After a little pause he asked: 'How did you escape your mother's vigilance?'

'It was easy to secure my mother's permission for meeting you in this secluded spot. I told her that this was the first step I am taking to get married to you. I have no doubt that she must have sent one of her female servitors to watch me talking to you. Tell me frankly, will you marry me?'

Pradyumna breathed heavily. He thought for a moment. 'I told you my sole object here was to find out what has happened to my grandfather. If I don't, my father will never forgive me. He would certainly wish that I should have died before accepting the mandate. But truth to tell, I am not capable of taking such a courageous course as my father would have taken.'

After a little pause, Pradyumna continued: 'Ask the King of Kings to give his permission to our marriage and then let your father formally celebrate it. That would solve the difficulty of our meeting whenever we like.'

'Oh, I would wish to meet you as often as possible. I have admired you from the time you came. Vasudeva's son, Mother Goddess has sent you to me.'

There was a change in Pradyumna. He smiled and said: 'If we are going to marry, let us begin from the beginning. Come into my arms. Whatever happens to me, God of Love will favour us.'

'We were married the moment we touched each other,' said Prabhavati. 'Night is ours. Didn't I tell you that there would be thunder and lightning tonight?'

'Thunder and lightning! Let us think of the way to overcome this difficulty. I wish 'mother Mayavati' were here. She could always find a way out of any difficulty.'

Gently, quietly, as he might have approached a wild bird, he talked to Prabhavati as to what *Dharma* meant and how as a *kshatriya* she was bound by *kshaatra-dharma*. However, he could scarcely bring himself to hope, but he found that she listened to him with increasing interest.

But when he ventured to introduce the very heart and soul of the matter, the divinity of his father, she openly expressed her difficulty in believing it. She remarked: 'How can a human being be a God?'

'When you come with me to Dwaraka, you will understand it. You will not only think that he is a God, but will feel it the moment you see him,' said Pradyumna.

'Does he fly in the air? Has he got a *viman* better than the one father has?' asked Prabhavati.

'No. He has something much more effective; the capacity of creating an atmosphere in which wickedness will go out of men's heart', replied Pradyumna and added: 'Have you noticed that since my arrival here, everyone is talking about my father's achievements?'

'I do not understand what you say', said Prabhavati.

'Why is the King of Kings so hostile to my father?' asked Pradyumna.

'All his life the King of Kings has dreamt of an empire which would include Aryavarta. He feels that Krishna is the greatest stumbling block in his way by making Aryavarta invulnerable', said Prabhavati and continued: 'You invoked your 'mother'. Is she as powerful as your father is?'

'Let me be frank with you', said Pradyumna. 'I want you to know all about me. There may be something in my career which you might decline to accept. But as I have always said, I am an instrument of the Gods. In course of my life, I came across this 'mother'. I am what she made me'.

'Tell me more about the 'mother'. I am feeling jealous. How did she come into your life?' asked Prabhavati.

'You must have perhaps heard the name of Shambar, the great Danava leader, who controlled most of the clans of the Danava world. He came across a helpless girl, brought her to his camp and they lived there as man and wife.'

After clearing his throat, he continued: 'During her early years, the Danava leaders sometime took her by turns, but the girl soon grew up into a masterful woman. She had no home, no parentage, but served the Danava leaders so well that she became the virtual dictator of the community'.

'Tell me more about her', said Prabhavati.

'Her strength of mind ultimately came to dominate the life of whoever came to know of her', said Pradyumna. 'One day she found a boy washed ashore and brought him to her cave'.

'Are you that child?' asked Prabhavati.

'Yes,' said Pradyumna. 'She brought me up first as a mother. We slept in the same cave. I lived in her and she in me. She found me to be promising, lovable, resourceful and jovial.'

'It is very interesting,' said Prabhavati. 'I also found you to be promising, lovable, resourceful and jovial.' She added: 'I want to hear everything about you.'

He turned to Prabhavati and continued: 'She learnt from several sources that I was the child of Krishna Vaasudeva and decided to make me a flaming sword of *kshaatra-dharma*. Strong opposition came from Danava leaders. They wanted him to be a Danava chief.'

After a little pause, he continued: 'Uncle Uddhava who came to see 'mother' often was also convinced that I was the son of Krishna Vaasudeva, and my real mother was the Princess of Vidarbha, Rukmini. Uncle and 'mother' decided that I should not go to Dwaraka unless I was fully equipped in the skills of war and peace alike. I was a good student of Uncle Uddhava. 'Mother' was inspiring. Soon 'mother' and I developed the relations of man and wife.'

'How could you?' Prabhavati asked.

'Think of our plight. Here was a young woman flung by fate between several robbers. She was my father, mother. The only thing she loved was me. She took charge of my life and we had happy time together. When Shambar got mad over our relations and wanted to kill me, we fought a body combat and I killed him though I was only sixteen at that time. If you ever happen to meet her, you will find that she is not an ordinary woman, but a goddess, stern as fate. The only thing that she loves is me.'

'Where would she be now?' asked Prabhavati.

'I do not know. She will somehow or other come when needed,' said Pradyumna. 'When she was invited by father to retire to Girinagar Fort along with the other members of the family, she refused the hospitality offered and told him finally that she would be where I would be in life and death.'

Prabhavati asked: 'How can she come here? It is not easy. All round, the warriors who guard the fort are ready to kill anyone who trespasses upon this territory.'

'I think she would come here. I have tremendous faith in her. But very soon the dawn will break. You had better go to your house,' said Pradyumna. After a little pause, he added: 'I would love to talk to your father when he returns.'

'We leave tomorrow's worries for tomorrow,' said Prabhavati as she flung herself into his arms.

Suddenly the silence of the night was broken by a shrill note of a peacock. Prabhavati almost jumped in joy as she thought it to be auspicious. But Pradyumna grew pale and released his arms which were holding Prabhavati.

Pradyumna responded by a bird's call. Then he turned round to Prabhavati and said: 'The Mother'.

CHAPTER 10

ON THE BATTLE-FIELD

TWO days later, Vajranabh returned from Matrikovata rather late. As was their custom, Prabhavati and her two sisters, knelt before him and received his affectionate pat on their back.

Prabhavati knew her father's moods and could read the turmoil going in his heart. Evidently, he was seriously perturbed.

Vajranabh accosted the other members of the family who were waiting for him. He then asked his senior wife, Pravichi: 'Where is our guest, valiant Yadava, Pradyumna?'

'He is in his house and has asked me to call him whenever you think it is convenient for you to receive his greetings.'

After a while, a servitor came before Vajranabh, bowed low and announced that the valiant Yadava, Pradyumna, had come to meet him. Vajranabh ordered the servitor to bring Pradyumna.

Pradyumna came and saluted by prostrating before him.

'My blessings', said Vajranabh, his voice filled with emotion. 'How are you getting on here?' he asked.

Prabhavati expected her father to open the topic which was uppermost in her mind; but her respect for him deterred her from raising it.

The family then dispersed in order to prepare themselves for the meal. Nobody relished the meal. Everyone behaved as if a thunder-bolt was going to fall on them.

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'What is going to happen to us?' asked Pravichi. 'You seem to be disturbed. I have never seen you so gloomy before.'

'Did you convey the King of King's message to Prabhavati?' Vajranabh asked.

'What is the calamity?' asked Prabhavati. 'You seem to have received a shock'.

'Shock is not the proper word; I am stunned', replied Vajranabh.

'What is it, father?' Prabhavati modestly looked down.

'Have you agreed to wed valiant Yadava, Pradyumna?'

'Your wish is a command', replied Prabhavati.

'It is not my wish, but the mandate of the King of Kings', said Vajranabh and continued: 'There is no other way, my dear child'.

'Tell us all, Lord. We will share the danger with you', said Pravichi.

Vajranabh cleared his throat and said: 'The thunderbolt is going to fall on us'. A sob of anguish came from his heart.

'What is it, father?' repeated Prabhavati. Her eyes were also filled with tears.

The eyes of Vajranabh, the stern warrior, was humid too. 'Listen, my child; my father, valiant Vegavan, lived and died for the King of Kings. Now he wants everyone of us to die for him,' he said.

He called a faithful servitor, standing by the door and told him: 'Go out and drive away anyone found spying on us'.

'Yes, lord', said the servitor. He knelt before his master and touched the ground with his forehead in token of his loyalty. Then he left the room.

'Mother of Prabhavati', said Vajranabh to Pravichi, 'summon whatever courage is left in you.'

The four of them lapsed into tense silence, awaiting Vajranabh to speak.

'When I went to meet the King of Kings yesterday, assuming a terrific pose he told me that Prabhavati should marry this valiant Yadava'.

'Don't you worry, father, about me', said Prabhavati.

'This cannot be out of love for us or even for you, valiant Yadava. This was only a preparation for destroying us'.

After a little while, he continued: 'If Pradyumna is unwilling to marry you, he might forthwith get him killed. If you marry him, he would insist on the young Yadava staying with you here as a hostage.'

Vajranabh wiped his tears, cleared his throat and continued: 'He would force both of you into each other's arms under compulsion. But that is not enough for him. If you, valiant Pradyumna, escape us, he will kill everyone of us for helping you to go out of the Mugg Fort and our failure to carry out his plan. If the Plan fails, he will surely cut my throat'.

Pradyumna cast a contemptuous look. 'What can his mandate do to us? We are already pledged to each other'.

Vajranabh interrupted: 'You know that a silent war has been going on between the Yadavas and the King of Kings.'

'When did this 'silent war' begin?' asked Pradyumna.

'It began with the *swayamvara* of the three Princesses of Kashi. Your Bhishma kidnapped them for his grandsons. One of them, Ambaa, had fallen in love with the King of Kings and refused to marry the Kuru Prince. Then Bhishma offered her in marriage with the King of Kings. But the King of Kings refused to marry the Kashi Princess. He was defeated in *swayamvara* fight and having lost the battle, he would not accept her.

'I was then a young man and accompanied the King of

Kings to the battle-field, bubbling with enthusiasm, to fight Bhishma. The King of Kings was a valiant Prince, full of affection for those who served him well. I was his favourite then.'

'Did not Grandfather, Vegavan, restrain him?' asked Prabhavati.

'Noble Vegavan shared with the King of Kings the ambition to bring all Arya Kings under his hegemony. The King of Kings always cast his eyes on Aryavarta. He wanted to conquer it. It was a favourite dream of his life.'

After a little pause, he continued: 'The King of Kings, in alliance with Jarasandha, the Emperor of Magadha, wanted to destroy the Kings in Aryavarta. This grand alliance was organised to meet the danger of Arya supremacy.

'Kamsa, the son-in-law of Jarasandha, also joined the alliance. But he was killed by the young upstart, Krishna, your father, who was just a cowherd—excuse me, but that is how the King of Kings used to refer to him.

'Joining hands with Jarasandha, the King of Kings attacked Gomantaka, where Krishna and Balarama had found an asylum, but failed.

'Everytime the King of Kings joined Jarasandha in alliance, they failed to achieve victory. Krishna was not merely a defender of Aryas, but a defender of *Dharma* for which you stood.

'I joined the King of Kings when he burnt down Mathura. But your father, Krishna, was clever; with his people, he escaped to Saurashtra.

'At the *swayamvara* of Draupadi, your valiant father induced him to withdraw.

'Headed by Yadava warriors, Krishna went to attend the Rajasuya Yagna of Yudhishthira at Indraprastha. The King of Kings felt that this was the opportunity to destroy Yadavas.

'You know very well how you fought the King of Kings at Dwaraka. He had to confess defeat by running away from the battle-field. We expected that you, Pradyumna, who was only wounded in the battle-field would either be captured or killed. In the battle, however, your brother Charudeshna was killed and your other brother Samba was wounded.

'After the Danava warriors left the battle-field, we collected as many dead bodies of Danava warriors as were lying there and consigned them to the sacred fire.'

Patting on Pradyumna's back, he continued: 'You fought with the King of Kings well. You were very courageous.

'When we came here, the news of our defeat had preceded us. But there lies the alchemy which only the King of Kings is capable of performing. He moved about as if he had conquered. In fact, every house in our town was demoralised. He set me to re-organise the Danava forces. You know that in the battle, my father, Vegavan, and Vivindha, were killed. Kshemavriddhi, Minister, fled from the battle-field, overwhelmed by the arrows of Samba, your brother.'

'I do not think it is wise of me to tell you all that happened at the battle-field; it will only make you more unhappy than what you are now', said Vajranabh.

CHAPTER 11

SHALVA LAUGHS

TEN days later, the King of Kings celebrated the marriage of Pradyumna with Prabhavati with due ceremony.

It came as a surprise to every one who heard about the marriage of Prabhavati, daughter of Vajranabh, with Pradyumna, the eldest son of Krishna, the great Arya leader who had acquired ascendancy in the Aryan world and who had killed the King of King's principal allies, Kamsa, Shishupal and Jarasandha.

Each time Shalva tried to destroy Krishna, the result was the same. His allies were killed in the battle one by one by Krishna with the aid of his miraculous weapon, *sudarshana chakra.*

The marriage procession was led by Vajranabh and Pradyumna, the drummers, fife players and the acrobats preceding it. Then followed the camel riders. They were surrounded by chosen warriors of the clan, proudly waving their naked swords.

The womenfolk did not join the procession; only the female members of Vajranabh's family followed them in litters.

Pravichi, the senior wife of Vajranabh and the mother of the bride, accompanied the bride in the litter. Deep sorrow was writ large on her at parting with her favourite daughter.

In the royal chamber, Shalva sat awaiting the procession with a smile on his lips and agony in his heart. Every Danava felt that getting the son of their bitterest enemy as the son-in-law was scarcely an adequate compensation.

Shalva felt deeply humiliated at getting Vajranabh's daughter married to the son of Krishna. It was a confession of complete failure—a ghastly one. However, he took satisfaction that at the present unsatisfactory condition of the fighting men, that was the only thing he could do.

When the procession approached the royal chamber, all swordsmen lifted their swords to indicate the happiness of the community at the marriage.

When Vajranabh and Pradyumna entered the royal chamber, they knelt before the King of Kings and so did the high-ranking warriors who formed part of the procession.

The King of Kings glanced at Vajranabh indicating how happy he was at Prabhavati becoming a member of the family of his arch enemy, but it was a make-belief. Everyone in his heart of hearts registered a bitter humiliation which Shalva himself had caused.

The King of Kings welcomed them. 'Come in, valiant Vajranabh,' said Shalva. 'It is a great day for us and in honour of this occasion, I present you with this ring.'

Then he turned to Pradyumna and said: 'I congratulate you, young Yadava, on your entering our family. Your father lives in sin, but for you we have nothing but affection and admiration.'

After a little pause, he continued: 'You are going to marry the most worthy daughter of the house of noble Vegavan and may you get a hundred sons! Those are my blessings. You, son of demon Krishna, would henceforward stay in Mugg Fort and be at our side when we come into contact with our enemies. Our blood will now mingle with yours.'

He called Pradyumna near him and took out his dagger.

He picked his arm and also the hand of Pradyumna and mixed the blood of both of them.

When the blood was mixed, there arose a cry of victory from the high-ranking warriors. The cry was taken up by the crowd waiting outside the chamber. After the shouts subsided, there was a cynical smile on Pradyumna's lips.

At the end of the ceremony, all Danava warriors again formed themselves into a procession.

While leaving, according to the instructions of Vajranabh, Pradyumna approached the King of Kings and knelt before him.

The King of Kings said: 'Vajranabh, Pradyumna is a courageous warrior and though he has not the tradition which we have, I am sure, he would help us.' Turning to Pradyumna he said: 'Now go and pay your respects at the shrine of the Great and Invincible Divine Mother—Uma.'

Women belonging to the high-ranking families had also gathered in their litters at the foot of the hill when the bride was brought there. This time, the litter was carried by Pravichi, Prabhavati's mother. Rest of the women followed her on foot.

When they reached it, the ladies singing songs gathered round the litter.

The shrine consisted of nine sacred stones. In the middle of the nine sacred stones was installed an image of Lord Shiva which was worshipped as *Prajapati*, the Lord of Creation and his Spouse, Divine Mother.

After the worship, they proceeded to the Mugg Fort where the King of Kings gave a dinner to all those who attended the marriage.

Pradyumna was furious. His heart was full of self-confrontation; he had hated the way he had lived during the last ten days in Mugg Fort. He had failed to keep his promise to his father. He had failed to achieve a spectacular victory—even a small one. He had to resign himself to leading an ignominious life.

Of course, in order to carry out his plans, he had to take a pledge of loyalty to the King of Kings, the bitterest enemy of the Yadavas. He had to marry the daughter of Vajranabh, who, he was sure, would as early as possible raid Dwaraka again and kill his father and uncles.

He had searched his heart and found that he was going to die not as a hero pledged to *kshaatra-dharma,* but as a coward betraying his father and family, and proving untrue to his 'mother' for whose sake he had taken this risk. There was no escape, he was convinced, from the ignominious life and to enjoy the little freedom which was allowed to him by Shalva. He had to marry Prabhavati, a Danava girl. He saw no sense in his action.

In Prabhavati, he found a brave comrade who was ready to join him in breaking through the fence which Shalva had made around him.

Again and again he thought why Shalva had changed his strategy; why he had given up his old idea of waging war against the Yadavas of Dwaraka.

If he had declined to marry, Prabhavati would be brokenhearted and he would be killed by the King of Kings. The career of Vajranabh would have been ruined. Possibly, he would have been killed if he ran away. If he committed suicide. Vajranabh and his family would be guilty and would be punished.

After the worship of the Divine Mother, the wedded couple were taken by Vajranabh to the royal chamber, where sat the King of Kings surrounded by warriors, with the chamberlain waving peacock feathers.

Turning to Pradyumna, the King of Kings said: 'You, the son of Krishna Vaasudeva, have rightly rejected your wicked father and have taken the wisest step in marrying

Vajranabh's daughter. Now what do you propose to do?'

'To enjoy whatever little freedom you have allowed me and live in the Mugg Fort with the daughter of noble Vajranabh', replied Pradyumna.

'Valiant Vajranabh, look after your son-in-law. I understand that Krishna and the other Yadavas are likely to encroach upon our lands which have been acquired by our bravery.'

After a little pause, Shalva continued: 'It will not take more than ten days before we reach the frontier. In the meantime, valiant Vajranabh would see that Pradyumna is given complete knowledge as to how we live.'

The King of Kings then by gesture asked others to go out of the hall. Then he turned to Prabhavati and said: 'Prabhavati, come with me. I want to talk to you.'

When they went into the other room, Prabhavati stood silently trembling like a leaf before Shalva to seek his blessings. She saluted him by touching the ground with her head.

'You are a true Danava girl,' said Shalva. 'Be loyal to Pradyumna and maintain the high traditions of the Danava women.'

Prabhavati understood what the King of Kings meant. She could not speak. Her voice was choked up.

There was tense silence in the hall. There was a sudden change in the face of the King of Kings. He laughed, and laughed and laughed.

CHAPTER 12

PRABHAVATI MAKES UP HER MIND

WHEN Prabhavati met Pradyumna at night in the hut set apart for them, she almost collapsed. There was no joy, no peace. Tears were in her eyes and agony in her heart.

Pradyumna gently placed his hands on the shoulders of his wife. He gathered her in his arms as she helplessly sank herself into them.

After a short exchange of dalliance as husband and wife, they began to assess the situation which faced them.

Pradyumna asked: 'What is the matter, Prabhavati? After meeting the King of Kings, you seem to be overwhelmed with misery.'

'I know what he wants us to do,' said Prabhavati.

'We are facing a grim tragedy,' said Pradyumna.

Prabhavati looked at her husband with hope and confidence of a newly wedded couple, and said: 'Now that we are one as husband and wife, we could defy the whole world.'

Pradyumna said: 'From now on we have to count the moments which have been given to us by the King of Kings, but we must make the best use of them. The problem is how to meet the dangerous situation that has been created by the King of Kings.'

After a little pause, he continued: 'There is no escape from this terrific situation. You must have courage, Prabhavati. You know your father has accepted the plan set up by the King of Kings and this marriage of ours might have been devised by your father as an instrument of our destruction.'

'How horrible! Suppose I beg of my father not to wage war against the Yadavas, what would he say?' asked Prabhavati.

'He is not playing a child's game. The problem is to find out why he welcomed me with such effusive compliments, why this marriage of ours was celebrated by him and why he wanted me to stay here longer. Prabhavati, forget everything. You said that this night was going to bring thunder and lightning. It may be true, but you must not forget that the time at our disposal is very short,' said Pradyumna.

Since she received the 'mandate' from the King of Kings, Prabhavati was not herself. Time and again, she touched the thin instrument which she had concealed in her hair. Now she was expected to keep up the high tradition of Danava women, whatever it was.

There was a rumour that certain women had been chosen in the past by the King of Kings to carry out certain mandates which nobody knew what they were.

She knew not the purpose for which the 'mandate' was to be carried out. She had not the courage to ask her mother what the 'mandate' was, but this much she was sure that it would bring a disaster.

If carried out, the 'mandate' would destroy her life, her home, and would mean the loss of her husband whom she had come to love and respect.

Will she be able to carry out the 'mandate'? Was it possible for her to have the courage to do it?

If she faced it with disobedience, the next morning her father and the whole family would be killed by the King of Kings.

She looked at her husband now and again. Every time she did, waves of emotion swept over her. How handsome and how intelligent he was, she thought.

How could she then ask her mother about the 'mandate'? Perhaps she knew all about the 'mandate' when she was in her youth. She might have assassinated some one in order to earn the hand of her father, Vajranabh.

She could see that her father and mother sometimes exchanged meaningful glances at each other. Why was her father, who was so frank, secretive over this 'mandate'?

How was she to save herself and her husband from this 'mandate'? If she did not obey it, the King of Kings would kill her husband immediately. How could she go to him asking for extension of time?

She must either obey the 'mandate' and become an assassin of her husband or invite the King of Kings' wrath the next day for disobeying his 'mandate'. There was no way of escape.

The servitors of the King of Kings must have been posted to prevent her and her husband from running away; and if they ran away, to whom could they have gone even for advice.

Her mother had kept her away from this secret because she would not like her husband and herself being assassinated by the King of Kings.

She lay in the embrace of Pradyumna imagining that she was leading the happiest of life, but that thought did not give her any happiness.

She knew that her mother would never forgive her for disobeying the 'mandate'.

Why was her husband so cruel, she thought. Did he know of the 'mandate'? Yes, to some extent because after her meeting with the King of Kings, he had called her to his private room to meet him alone. What could be the 'mandate'?

All the time, both of them were making love, Pradyumna was watching her, sometimes with deep concern in his eyes.

Pradyumna treated her gently as a mother would treat her child. He knew that she must have been given some orders by the King of Kings which she did not like.

Pradyumna could sense that Prabhavati was miserable beyond words.

She was trying her best to find the motive of the King of Kings. After a little while, she gave up her attempts.

There was only one night between what would be her last day of happiness and the misery into which she would be thrown the next day, she thought.

Would it save her husband if she disobeyed the 'mandate'? No, he would be killed by the King of Kings. If she carried out the 'mandate', would it do her any good? Certainly not.

In one of those outbursts of emotion, she asked in a silent prayer to her Mother Goddess—Uma—as to whether she could save her and her husband from this 'mandate'.

If she disobeyed the King of Kings, he would kill her father. How it would help the King of Kings, she could never understand.

Why was he unforgiving towards her father? She had gathered from some personal remarks that her father considered the King of Kings as an enemy.

But it was inevitable that she should obey the 'mandate' this very night.

Pradyumna was clever. He smiled, he laughed. He patted her on her back. Now and again, he caressed her as if there was no other care in the world except to please her. He could sense her struggle which stirred her mind. He was waiting to discover what she would do next.

He did not ask her what the 'mandate' was. He knew that sometime or other, she murmured some prayer to her Goddess, Uma, the Invincible Mother.

He knew that she was struggling with some powerful emotion. Tears were in her eyes. He saw that she was making some decision.

She placed her hand on him and drew him closer to her breast. What to do, what to do, what to do, was the cry in her heart.

She thought and thought as the only way she found was to sacrifice Pradyumna so that the wrath of the King of Kings may not descend on her and her family. Suddenly, she made up her mind.

Pradyumna sensed her decision. However, like a helpless child, he submitted to the pressure of her embrace.

He saw how helplessly she clung to him; at the same time, he was waiting for some opportunity which she was seeking.

Suddenly, he released himself from her embrace and lay down on her lap. He looked up at her face. He knew that she was making some decision.

Suddenly, a flash came: Vajranabh had told him during the course of conversation that the Danava women would assassinate their lovers while they lay down with their heads on the women's laps.

The whole thing became clear to him. She was making up her mind, to knife him now as he lay apparently helpless in her lap. He laughed to himself as he followed the course of her mind.

She bit her lips. She drew out something from her hair to carry out the 'mandate'.

He slid his hands on her laps. He felt that she was closing her eyes. She finally bit her lips. He heard her speaking 'No, no. I cannot do it . . . I must, I must,' she said to herself.

Just as he felt that she had decided to do with the 'mandate', Pradyumna opened his eyes, laughed and got hold of her hand in which she held the knife.

She did not know what to do. Pradyumna held her hands firmly, and seized the knife.

Prabhavati was frightened beyond words. She dropped the knife. 'I can't. I can't. I can't.'

Chapter 13

THE MOTHER ARRIVES

'I KNOW you can't', said Pradyumna.

Like a little child, she thought that she had failed in carrying out the Mandate and as such lost her husband for ever.

Pradyumna rose from the lap of Prabhavati, who was sobbing all the time. Prabhavati placed her hands over her eyes. Pradyumna took the thin knife with one hand and with the other embraced her.

'Prabhavati, I know you would not do away with a man who loves you as I do', said Pradyumna.

She looked bewildered for a moment and then said: 'Lord, I do not deserve to live'. She broke in sobs again. 'I had been bringing only troubles to everybody.'

'Don't cry. If we die, we shall die together,' said Pradyumna.

Prabhavati was in sheer despair. Pradyumna laughed and patted her on the back. I am glad you have the courage to defy the tradition of the house of the King of Kings. You must better stop worrying over what might have happened.' After a little pause, he continued: 'Between now and morning, we have to discover a way to escape.'

'What shall we do? There is no other way,' Prabhavati cried in despair.

'Midnight will bring some relief. Get ready to leave at the midnight drumbeats', said Pradyumna.

Prabhavati looked at Pradyumna cynically. 'You said that your 'mother' would never forsake you,' she said. She could not help being cynical even at this moment.

'I know what can one person do? There would be man-hunt immediately it comes to the knowledge of the King of Kings that we have left Mugg Fort,' she said.

'Have the same confidence in Father as I have. I am praying to Him to come to our rescue.'

'Your Father! Coming to our rescue! Impossible, Lord. He is far away from us. Dwaraka is yet in disarray. How can he come to our rescue?'

'Prabhavati, let us not waste our time on talking about what He would do', said Pradyumna.

'I do not understand what you are talking' said Prabhavati.

'It is not the first time when people in distress have prayed to Father for help and he has come to their rescue,' said Pradyumna. 'But we must have absolute confidence in Him. Then only He will come.'

'I have not the same confidence in Him,' said Prabhavati and continued: 'Suppose my confidence is misplaced, my lord would die and there would be no way of escaping from here. Even if Father comes, He will only help you and not me.'

Prabhavati cried out in despair. With tears in her eyes, she tried to join him in praying to Krishna.

Suddenly Vajranabh came rushing with naked sword in his hand. 'Prabhavati, stop wherever you are and if Pradyumna is with you, ask him to stay where he is. His days are numbered.'

Pradyumna did not know what to do. He had only a short knife which could not afford any defence against the long naked sword of Vajranabh. Two servitors also came out from the darkness ready to fall upon Pradyumna.

Pradyumna was surprised to see that though Vajranabh had Pradyumna in his grip, he was hesitating to use the sword against him. Vajranabh whispered in a low voice. 'You fool, why don't you catch hold of me. Throw me down, you fool'.

Pradyumna understood what Vajranabh meant. Had he taken the role of an assassin but wanted him to be caught himself by Pradyumna?

With one hand he caught hold of Pradyumna and with the other, tremblingly he let the sword slip to the ground. Pradyumna understod the game. Pradyumna caught hold of the sword as it fell to the ground.

Without his sword, Vajranabh also fell down as Pradyumna easily sat on his chest. The two servitors with half-swords in their hands made no serious attempt to run to the defence of Vajranabh, but ran away.

Vajranabh said: 'Don't kill me, Pradyumna, please'.

Pradyumna understood the meaning of what was happening. He gave a couple of kicks to Vajranabh for all to see and asked him to get up, which he did.

Vajranabh took out a rope, which was rounded up to his waist, and told Pradyumna: 'You fool, take this rope and tie me soon'.

From the darkness a new figure emerged—a forest woman clad in leaves with sword in hand.

Prabhavati was shocked to see an elderly woman clad in forest clothes with bedraggled hair, taking Pradyumna in her arms.

'My boy, don't worry. It is I', said she. 'I am glad because I am in time.'

Vajranabh interrupted. 'Don't worry, Pradyumna. The King of Kings has left for Pushkaravarta. Evidently, that part of the territory was invaded by the Yadava chief. He has left Matrikovata in my charge. This is the first act of my new office—to capture you'. He laughed aloud and continued:

'Let the King of Kings put himself at a safe distance. You had better get ready to go out from here.'

Looking at Mayavati, Prabhavati asked: 'Who is this woman?'

'This is 'mother' about whom I talked to you', said Pradyumna.

'Whoever you are, leave us to ourselves', said Prabhavati crying.

'Stop crying. You are standing here. You are not a baby.' She then gave a slap to Prabhavati.

Prabhavati did not understand her properly. She had no experience of the ways of the 'mother'. She broke into violent sobs. 'I am his wife', she said.

'Sooner you know me the better', said the 'mother.' 'I was his mother for many years. Then I was his mother, father and the whole world.'

After a little pause, she continued: 'Don't worry, Prabhavati. He has married me also.'

'Where is the 'mandate' with which you tried to kill Pradyumna?' asked Vajranabh. 'If I had not come in time, he would have been dead long ago. Now the difficulty is how to put him across the sands of the desert'.

'If you can, please take me also,' said Prabhavati.

'I have used this 'mandate' on several occasions', said Vajranabh. Turning to Pradyumna he said: 'Now get yourself busy tying me up. Some of my men would be waiting for you at the foot of the hill. Hurry up'.

'What about the King of Kings?' asked Pradyumna.

'Don't worry about those things. The King of Kings will take care of himself. He is on his way to Pushkaravarta with his hundred camel-riders to defend our territory'.

Vajranabh had his strategy ready. Camel-riders fully equipped, were ready to move out of Matrikovata.

Prabhavati got hold of Pradyumna's hands and cried: 'Are we to leave mother Pravichi here?'

'Prabhavati, you are a stupid girl', said the 'mother'. 'There is a time to weep, a time to act, and a time to suffer in silence. All these three occasions are now before you and you are as mad as ever. You do not realise the danger that we are in. The King of Kings might come here tomorrow'.

Prabhavati went on crying. She did not know what to do.

'This Yadava has put me to the choice of either making my wife a widow or my daughter a widow,' said Vajranabh.

Pradyumna laughed. 'But you did not succeed in using the 'mandate' against me'.

'We have only a very short time to prepare ourselves between now and the sun rise and if we allow the time to lapse, we would be caught and killed on the spot', said Vajranabh.

After a little pause, he continued: 'I can't face the wrath of the King of Kings and court death. You must take me also with you. Either all of us go together or die together.'

Pradyumna interrupted with a laugh. 'All of us are in the same difficulty. Please survive the wrath of the King of Kings. But I have another duty to perform and that is to find whether my Grandfather, noble Vasudeva, is still alive or dead and if alive, where he is'.

'He is not here. He cannot be in the King of Kings' Fort. Perhaps he is in the prison in the Mugg Fort', replied Vajranabh.

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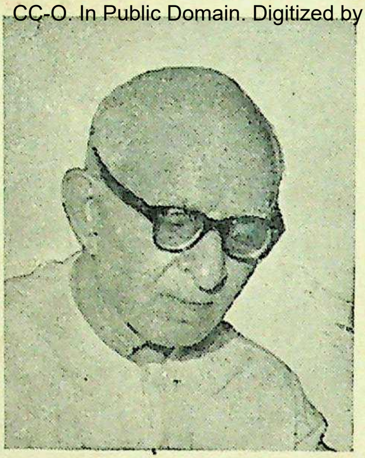

THE AUTHOR

(1887-1971)

KANAIYALAL MANEKLAL MUNSHI's versatility and achievements were in a way unique. He was an eminent lawyer, one of the framers of India's Constitution and a seasoned statesman. Coming under the inspiring influence of Sri Aurobindo during his student days, Munshi had been an ardent fighter for India's freedom, working at different stages in close association with Jinnah, Tilak, Besant, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru. His achievements as Home Minister of Bombay in 1937, as India's Agent-General in Hyderabad before the Police Action, as India's Food Minister and as Governor of Uttar Pradesh had been characterised by rare courage and decisive energy.

Acknowledged as the foremost writer in modern Gujarati literature, he has to his credit a vast and varied literature including novels, dramas, memoirs and history in Gujarati, as also several historical and other works in English, notably "Gujarat and Its Literature", "Imperial Gurjaras", "Creative Art of Life", "To Badrinath", "The End of an Era", "Krishnavatara", "Bhagavad Gita and Modern Life", "Saga of Indian Sculpture", "Bhagawan Parashurama", "Tapasvini" and "Prithvi Vallabh".